CONSUMING CATASTROPHE:

AUTHENTICITY AND EMOTION IN MASS-MEDIATED DISASTER

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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Abstract

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Timothy Recuber

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This dissertation explores the interwoven fabric of news, entertainment, advertising, and commodities through which Americans have come to experience and understand four disasters of the past decade: the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, and the financial crisis. Chapter one examines the historical development of the consumption of disaster, from the eighteenth century excavation of Pompeii to the Space Shuttle Challenger's explosion in 1986. It argues that modern culture has increasingly come to value the seemingly fleeting aura or authenticity of mass-mediated images and mass-consumed products, and that this has contributed to the popularity of disasters in mass culture, since disasters are typically viewed as especially authentic. The importance of such authenticity is demonstrated in the second chapter, in which content analysis of television news broadcasts shows that the more immediate, authentic September 11 news coverage generated greater public trust in official risk assessments than did news coverage of the financial crisis, despite the very similar framing techniques employed in coverage of both disasters. The perceived realness of disaster allows even normally skeptical audiences to engage with disaster-related media and products in intensely emotional ways, as is demonstrated in chapter three. By examining two news broadcasts, one documentary film, and one reality television program devoted to Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, the chapter argues that mass culture has increasingly adopted a kind of depoliticized,

empathetic way of viewing the suffering of others. This alternative, empathetic norm is related to the rise of therapeutic, self-help culture, which is discussed in chapter four in conjunction with new forms of online commemoration. By studying digital archives devoted to September 11 and Hurricane Katrina, the chapter reveals that even new, online spaces of disaster mediation evince an individualistic, atomized version of the therapeutic ideal, in which contributing to an online archive is more about helping to heal oneself than helping to heal a community of others. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that disaster consumerism derails the communal or progressive potential of disasters by replacing them with individualistic, depoliticized acts of consumption.

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Other faculty in the Sociology Department at The Graduate Center inspired me in their classes, and impressed me with their humor and devotion to students outside of class. My fellow students at the GC also helped me in a variety of ways, whether collaborating with me on course projects, offering advice on navigating through the program, or helping me blow off steam at local watering holes.

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Finally, I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to my future daughter, Margot. Her impending birth has been the light at the end of the tunnel while I finished writing this dissertation, and I can't wait to meet her.

Table of Contents

Introduction

A Decade of Disaster

"Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers" read the headline in the January 26, 2011 issue of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. The accompanying article described the passage of a fictional "9/11 First Capitalizers Act," designed to honor those "who sensed the direness of the moment and immediately sprang into action on that terrible day, exploiting it for personal profit" (*Onion*, 2011, p. 1). Included in this group were "not only those who rushed to Ground Zero immediately to sell merchandise, participate in photo ops, or advance an ideological agenda, but also those who profited from afar by producing jingoistic songs and TV specials, or mentioning 9/11 in stump speeches as a way of scaring people into voting for them" (*Onion*, 2011, p. 7). Although the article singled out some real-life "capitalizers" such as country musician Toby Keith, filmmaker Oliver Stone, Halliburton CEO David Lesar, and George W. Bush, it also described a 48 year-old woman named Linda Banks, "who continues to trot out her maudlin, self-serving story of where she was on 9/11 every single time she sees an opportunity" (Ibid). The article closed by stating that a special plaque would be erected on the National Mall "containing the names of all 12,554,310 Americans who eventually capitalized on the tragedy" through "advertising, partisan rhetoric, forgettable novels, defense contracts, and all-around cheap, manipulative sentimentalism" (Ibid).

Although the "9/11 First Capitalizers Act" is a fabrication, the criticism behind this satire is quite real. Many commentators have been bothered by the roles of mass media and consumer culture in the American public's response to the September 11 attacks, and the political uses to which that response was ultimately put. Some, like social theorist Frederic Jameson, argued that

the public's emotional reaction to 9/11 constituted a kind of "utterly insincere" hysteria (Jameson, 2002, p. 297). Others, such as film critic Anthony Lane, were troubled by the degree to which viewers' responses to the spectacle of the attacks mimicked everyday forms of cinema spectatorship. He asked, "where have you heard those expressions most recently—the wows, the whoohs, the holy shits—if not in movie theatres, and even on your own blaspheming tongue?" (Lane, 2001, para. 2). Professor Marita Sturken criticized the consumption of sentimental 9/11-themed souvenirs for encouraging a "culture of innocent victimhood" (Sturken, 2007, p. 31) that avoided scrutiny of American foreign policy. And globalization critic Naomi Klein suggested, as did many others, that after September 11, "The Bush administration immediately seized upon the fear generated by the attacks not only to launch the 'War on Terror' but to ensure that it is an almost entirely for-profit venture" (Klein, 2007, p. 12).

Whether aimed at the news media, real estate developers, Hollywood producers, souvenir venders, government officials, or American consumers, these types of ethical, aesthetic, and political condemnations formed a countercurrent to the tide of mainstream public opinion immediately after September 11. As the decade continued, new American disasters sprang forth and generated surprisingly similar processes of mediation, consumption, and some would say exploitation, which were often the subject of similar rebukes. Just as many held that tourism at the Ground Zero site was a morally dubious activity, so too did travel to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina become a potentially ghoulish act. As one FEMA disaster recovery volunteer recalled on a website devoted to the storm: "It was not without reservation that I went to St. Bernard parish. I felt like- I was a voyeur in their neighborhood" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/2057). The problem of voyeurism appeared again after the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech: NBC News was flooded with criticism online and in print after

it decided to air parts of Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho's digital manifesto, and some victims and their families cancelled their scheduled television appearances on the network as a result (Johnson, 2007). It seems that when otherwise normal forms of commerce, entertainment, politics, or mass communication take disaster as their subject or inspiration, they suddenly rankle the sensibilities of many Americans.

Yet many more engage in precisely these types of activities each time a disaster strikes. Even *The Onion* recognized this by asserting that over 12 million people had "capitalized" on the events of 9/11 in some fashion, and thus deserved the sarcastic inclusion of their names on an honorific plaque. An actual tally of implicated Americans might have resulted in a much higher number, however. If watching a disaster on television or visiting a disaster site makes one a voyeur, if reacting to a disaster emotionally is insincere, if using a disaster to make a political point is exploitative, and if creating a product, service, or work of art that responds to a disaster is simply a way to capitalize on tragedy, then very few Americans would have escaped the last decade ethically untarnished. The simple fact is that most Americans, and many others across the globe, rely on mass media and consumer culture to provide the resources through which we experience, understand, and respond to pain, tragedy, and loss—even, or perhaps especially, when they occur on a massive scale.

In a decade that saw the September 11 attacks followed by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, then the horror of the Virginia Tech shootings, and finally the near-collapse of the financial services industry that initiated a massive global economic downturn from which we have yet to recover, each of us has had to negotiate a stunning variety of images, texts, products, and services addressing the harrowing realities of disaster, crisis, and catastrophe. These negotiations, and the moral condemnations that sometimes accompany them, suggest that the

norms concerning appropriate personal, commercial, and political responses to disasters are in the process of shifting, and that a consensus on these matters has yet to emerge. Norms are the codes of conduct that delineate culturally acceptable behaviors, and that mark certain ways of seeing the world as legitimate or appropriate. "Just as sets of mutually consistent norms help regulate behavior, so sets of inconsistent or rapidly shifting norms… are often regarded as a symptom, if not a cause, of social unrest" (Hechter and Opp, 2001, p. xi). It makes sense, then, that a period in which Americans of every age, gender, race, religion, and social class had their senses of personal safety and economic security shaken would expose rifts and fractures in normative structures concerning not only disasters, but the role of mass media and consumer culture in American life in general.

This dissertation explores the interwoven fabric of news, entertainment, advertising, commodities, and other services through which Americans have come to experience and understand disasters over the past decade. Within this fabric are threaded the strands of a variety of norms concerning the moral, aesthetic, emotional, commercial, and political responses to disasters. These are often complementary, occasionally contradictory, and sometimes directly clash with one another. Yet from this densely woven tapestry, it is possible to pick out certain new or ascendant norms that explain the contemporary appeal of disaster consumption and spectatorship. Though many Americans are bothered by the consumerism of disaster, many more actively participate in it, and perhaps more accurately, those two groups need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Instead, individuals today are tasked with navigating the shifting cultural standards concerning forms of disaster spectatorship and consumerism that they may experience as morally appropriate, emotionally resonant, or in extreme cases, ethically repugnant.

In order to better understand the various normative frameworks involved in what I am calling *the consumption of disaster*, as well as the social, cultural, and political implications of such frameworks, this dissertation analyzes the texts and products that account for much of contemporary disaster consumption. These include television news programs, reality television shows, documentary films, and messages left at digital archives, as well as the myriad other commodities that cater to some aspect of disasters—comic books with patriotic themes, t-shirts or records benefitting disaster-related charities, home and office security devices designed to protect against future hurricanes or terrorist attacks, and social networking sites devoted to sharing one's grief over a mass tragedy, to name a few examples. After an initial chapter that traces the history of disaster consumption as far back as the destruction of the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, each subsequent chapter compares particular types of disaster-themed media and supplements those comparisons with examples from other aspects of consumer culture as well. This dissertation thus explores the ways in which images, texts, products, and experiences both reflected and shaped contemporary mores concerning the consumption and mediation of September 11, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shooting, and the ongoing financial crisis.

Though there are some obvious differences between these catastrophic events, I argue that mass media and consumer culture have responded to them in very similar ways. Traditional disaster sociologists might find the grouping together of these four events problematic, and even oppose the deployment of the terms disaster, catastrophe, and crisis as synonyms (see for instance Quarantelli, 2006; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002). Yet this grouping allows one to explore the similarities between these disparate cases, and to better understand how mass media and consumer culture make meaning out of loss and tragedy. Though the processes by which

communities respond to and cope with disasters have been expertly investigated by sociologists such as Kai Erikson (1994; 1976), their affects on national audiences who experience these disasters only through media images and mass commodities remain less thoroughly explored within this sub-discipline.

Scholars outside the traditions of disaster sociology have focused more specifically on disasters as generators of media, consumption, and capitalism. Kevin Rozario (2007) has highlighted the historical development of an American perspective on disasters in which they are seen as opportunities for both spiritual renewal and capitalist expansion. The current neo-liberal manifestation of this perspective may be the "shock doctrine" described by Naomi Klein (2007), in which elites in business and government depend on, and in some cases engineer, crises and catastrophes in order to shock the public into accepting aggressive and exploitative privatization schemes. Yet her account neglects the fact that, rather than shocked public acquiescence, disasters may trigger a flood of spontaneous nationalist sentiment, expressed through diverse forms of mass media and mass consumption, in support of many expansions of neo-liberal governance. Mike Davis (1999) has critiqued the forms of denial about real disasters and inequality that are embedded in fantastic disaster-themed media, focusing on the especially disaster-prone city of Los Angeles. Marita Sturken (2007) has examined the ways in which "kitsch" consumerism helped construct a "culture of comfort" that depoliticized the national traumas of the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11 attacks. And E. Ann Kaplan (2005) has coined the term "empty empathy" to describe the emotions generated by harrowing images of war and disaster when the news media fails to adequately contextualize them.

This dissertation expands on these and other works in scope and methodology. By tracing disaster consumption back to some of its earliest historical roots, I seek to understand which

aspects of the contemporary consumption of disaster are actually new, and which reflect elements and issues inherent in the mass communication of distant suffering. Similarly, by placing terrorism, natural disasters, school shootings, and financial crises all under the label disaster, I aim to expose the specific ways of looking, feeling, and experiencing that mass culture applies to all sorts of tragedies or crises, even when those occur on a much smaller scale. Finally, by focusing primarily on the *text* of media texts, that is, on television news transcripts, dialogue from a documentary film and a reality television show, and the messages left at digital archives, I attempt to take these artifacts of disaster consumption on their own terms. Rather than forcing my own scholarly or aesthetic interpretations onto otherwise silent commodities, I have tried to find places in the analyzed texts where the normative frameworks and strategies of disaster consumerism are made explicit.

Although many examples throughout the dissertation are drawn from mass media, I believe that *consumption* is an appropriate rubric with which to assess and understand the predominant ways of experiencing crisis and catastrophe today. As Raymond Williams (1985, p. 78) pointed out, the earliest English uses of the word *consume* came with negative connotations of destruction, using up, or wasting. In this sense, the consumption of disaster refers not only to the fact that disaster-related products, services, and media are increasingly available for purchase, but also that the heavily mediated experience of disaster in a consumer society involves using up the raw material of human tragedy, devouring the spectacular, tragic, and even the mundane aspects of catastrophes in brief and bright flashes of consumerism. Though the suffering they caused may persist, and the work of rebuilding may remain undone, once disasters lose their novelty or their resonance, one can expect to see fewer reminders of them on the evening news, in TV or magazine advertisements, and on the shelves of stores.

Another way of understanding the kind of raw material that gets consumed in this process is *authenticity*. The contemporary usage of authenticity is generally fraught with contradictory interpretations, but in this dissertation, I take authenticity to refer to the perceived quality of being unique, genuine, or, for lack of a better term, real. Though the difference between authentic and inauthentic sometimes seems natural—a home-cooked meal with locally-produced ingredients is more authentic than a meal at a fast-food chain, just as live news footage of a flooded New Orleans is more authentic than a Hollywood disaster film—authenticity ultimately refers to subjective, aesthetic distinctions, rather than any quality intrinsic to commodities, texts, or images. Disasters tend to pull large numbers of viewers and consumers based on the perception that they are much more real than the rest of what is available in contemporary media culture. Each disaster strikes us as new and immediate, creative in its unique pattern of destruction. Yet each also strikes primal emotional chords and reminds us of ancient calamities or biblical plagues. What's more, we know that disasters affect real people and real communities, and that "but for the grace of god" we too could be victims of a similar fate. In consumer culture today, such perceived authenticity is incredibly valuable and highly sought after by all sorts of companies, precisely because it can inspire powerful emotional responses from otherwise jaded or detached audiences (see Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I examine the historical conditions in which disasters first became topics for mass production and consumption. Although Pompeii's ancient destruction left behind a single eye-witness account, its rediscovery and excavation in the eighteenth century helped inspire a host of commodities, from silverware and pottery mimicking ancient styles to novels dramatizing the city's last days. Coupled with a devastating earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, these disasters helped steer Enlightenment thought towards new

understandings of natural disasters that were secular, scientific, and even occasionally romantic. Subsequent technological developments in mass production and communication continued to stoke public appetites for tales and artifacts of disaster, but the mid-twentieth century critique of modern culture as conformist and inauthentic really enabled disaster's contemporary status as a uniquely valuable carrier of authenticity. Walter Benjamin believed that new forms of mass-producible media, such as photography and film, had eliminated the authentic existence in a particular time and place characteristic of the "aura" of older forms of art (Benjamin, 1969), while other members of the Frankfurt school assailed the mass deceptions of the burgeoning "culture industry" of the 1940s (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944/2002). But Benjamin's earlier writings on the topic portrayed the aura as a sort of specter of reality that haunted its photographic reproductions (Benjamin, 1999; Duttlinger, 2008). Thus, one may understand the aura of disaster as the haunting trace of the real that simultaneously attracts a consumer culture in thrall to such authenticity, yet is always already in decay as media coverage and mass commodification begin to transform the disaster into spectacle, kitsch, morality play, or political platform.

Much of mass media spectatorship and mass consumption today involves an exercise in determining the authenticity or genuineness of people, products, or experiences—be they reality television stars (Andrejevic, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005), tourist sites (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), automobiles (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton, 2006), ethnic handicrafts (Wherry, 2006), jeans and sneakers (Botterill, 2007), or urban neighborhoods (Zukin, 2010; Zukin, 2008). In this same sense, audiences and consumers are tasked with assessing the authenticity of disaster-related texts and commodities, balancing potentially inauthentic aspects, such as their mass-produced, for-profit nature, against the seemingly undeniable kernel of real loss and pain with which they

have been imbued. The results of those assessments of authenticity appear to determine the level of socially acceptable economic, emotional, or political investment in these disaster-related products. Judging from the amount of disaster mediation and consumption that will be discussed in this dissertation, it appears that the normative debates and criticism described earlier refer not to a general prohibition against the consumption of disaster, but a variety of competing standards concerning the extent and value of authenticity. For some, watching the digital videos created by Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho on network television news offered an authentic, uncensored glimpse into the mind of an alienated young killer, and perhaps a chance to understand and prevent future school shootings, while for others the broadcast smacked of a sensationalist ratings grab and resulted in the glorification of a murderer. In either case, such ethical debates concerning disaster mediation tend to coalesce today around the theme of authenticity.

This process of assessing the authenticity and trustworthiness of media texts also helps audiences and consumers determine the appropriate level of apprehension over looming risks and future threats. Such was the case in news reports concerning the risk of terrorism after September 11, and in television news broadcasts concerning the risk of further economic collapse at several points during the financial crisis of 2008. Chapter Two compares news media from these two disasters and finds that very similar normative frameworks were at work in both. In each case these frames—persistent discursive principles that structure social reality and create shared cultural meanings (Reese, 2003)—heavily supported the government's official positions on the risks that the catastrophes of 9/11 and the financial crisis had exposed, and served to buttress the particular construction of reality upon which the government's very controversial and expensive solutions to both catastrophes were built. However, despite the similarity of their media framing, only one of these disasters inspired widespread public acceptance of government risk claims,

while the other engendered fierce political opposition to official policy proposals. As a correction to theories of a "risk society" first advanced by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), I argue that these differences showcase the increasing importance of authenticity in generating the sorts of powerful emotions that lead to trust in the risk assessments of government officials, technical experts, and other authority figures.

The emotional component of disaster consumption is therefore an important part of these processes. Sociologists who study disaster have long disputed the conventional wisdom that mass panic is the defacto public response to disasters, especially on the ground in affected communities (Quarantelli, 2001; Tierny, 2007). But while it is true that disaster-struck communities tend to exhibit a whole host of positive, pro-social responses, it does not mean that mass media accounts of disaster may not inspire panic in distant spectators who are less directly affected. Divorced from the kinds of sustaining, ad-hoc, local communities that maintain order and provide support during and in the immediate aftermath of disasters (see Solnit, 2009), those who merely consume distressing stories and images at a distance may be more likely to take drastic measures or respond with maudlin or hysterical emotional displays. Of course, mass media today tend to operate in crisis mode at all times, even over seemingly trivial matters (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), making the shock and immediacy of disaster-related stories an overly familiar style of communication and thus, at times, contributing to the onset of what has come to be known as "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999). On the other hand, and at the very least, American audiences of disasters have demonstrated over the past decade that distant or unaffected spectators are likely to feel that they too have been vicariously traumatized, and thus enfranchised to participate in mass-mediated rituals of commemoration, or to claim the social and political status of victim (see Savage, 2006; Kaplan, 2005).

Such vicarious trauma is often the result of very genuine emotional responses by these distant spectators. In fact, as discussed in Chapter Three, one of the most powerful norms that has emerged regarding the role of the spectator of disaster is the obligation to show empathy towards those directly affected. Media texts have particular ways of presenting the suffering others designed to draw out these reactions, as I show through an analysis of two news programs, one reality television show, and one documentary film devoted to Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings. This empathy for the suffering of distant others is rehearsed today even in non-disaster related media programming, but it is particularly prevalent when large-scale tragedies result in not only live television news broadcasts, but also the many commemorative events and products whose proceeds are supposed to benefit those distant others. Consuming such experiences and products marks one as an ethical, moral person with the capacity to understand the pain of others. Unlike classical forms of Enlightenment sympathy, however, in which detached spectators sought to actually alleviate the suffering of unfortunate others whose causes they found worthy, the empathy on display when one buys a Virginia Tech t-shirt or a record benefitting New Orleans musicians, or when one watches television programs devoted to these disasters, seems to be as much about self-improvement as the improvement of the conditions of those less fortunate. This is not to say that such consumption is not driven by sincere concern for disaster victims, but simply that mass culture tends to direct such concern towards viewing habits and consumption practices that help the self-image of the viewer or purchaser at least as much as they help any disaster-stricken communities.

The consumption of disaster thus encourages a kind of "political anesthesia" that reduces one's ability to recognize the collective solutions to problems, as well as one's willingness to work towards them (Szasz, 2007). Instead, the authentically threatening quality of disasters often

nurtures a paradoxically fantastic desire to secure the safety of oneself and one's family through private acts of consumerism. But these fantasies are often backwards looking; they envision the next disaster as a similar chain of catastrophic events that, having recently happened, is actually unlikely to happen again due either to officialdom's new awareness of this problem or simply to the remote odds of two similar disasters happening in such close succession. Of course, in the current American political moment of ascendant neo-liberal governance, such individualistic strategies of preventative consumption may constitute the only preventative measures being taken on one's behalf.

These atomizing tendencies of consumerism have even fed back into norms surrounding creative new forms of online experience. Rather than promoting a simple one-way consumption of information, the Internet increasingly encourages various types of digital content co-creation, which are often referred to as *prosumption* because they blur traditional distinctions between producers and consumers. Chapter Four examines the ways in which collective memory was co-created or prosumed at two digital archives where contributors uploaded messages and stories devoted to September 11 and Hurricane Katrina. Despite the communal nature of these efforts at online collection and commemoration, the themes of the messages collected there reveal them to be predominantly exercises in therapeutic self-help, in which the act of reading or writing a message was seen primarily as a form of psychic healing for oneself, rather than the community of other contributors. These archives also ended up abetting a kind of nationalistic pride concerning the events of 9/11, and a national forgetting of Hurricane Katrina, since few of the users who posted messages to the Katrina archive came from other parts of the country, while messages from users all across the nation were common at the September 11 site. While this was

no different from the overall national response to these two disasters, it still suggests that online alternatives to disaster consumerism are liable to replicate many of its underlying problems.

This dissertation seeks, then, to develop a broad theoretical model of disaster consumerism that holds true across diverse types of contemporary crises or catastrophes. In this model, a disaster and the texts and commodities it generates stand out from the normal flow of mass media and popular culture because they are generally perceived as more authentic. This authenticity allows otherwise skeptical consumers to invest genuine emotion in the media coverage of the disaster, as well as in subsequent acts of consumption devoted to displaying patriotism, securing one's home, expressing empathy, enacting therapeutic self-help, or any of the other goals and motivations of disaster consumerism. This authenticity also encourages many of the kinds of economic or political "capitalizing" described at the start of this introduction. As time passes and images and commodities from the disaster become increasingly commonplace, one sees a disaster's authenticity itself become consumed or used up. In this period, with its aura of sacredness diminished, critical, oppositional, or ironic responses to the disaster become more socially acceptable, and the risk claims and emotional reactions that the disaster had inspired become subject to retrospective scrutiny. This has certainly been the case with September 11, as even the satirical story from *The Onion* attests. But a trace of that reality, an aura of authenticity, tends to haunt disaster commodities long after those tragic events have dulled in our memories.

In sum, this dissertation argues that authenticity is an ascendant cultural standard for evaluating the media and commodities associated with disasters. This standard brings with it certain particular ways of looking at, understanding, and responding to the suffering of others and the risk claims of authorities that emerge in a disaster's wake. By tracing these themes through a variety of texts and commodities devoted to different American disasters of the last

decade, I also hope to arrive at an understanding of how contemporary norms concerning disaster consumption and spectatorship might be steered towards more positive, equitable, communal ends. After all, as the decade drew to a close, the United States was still mired in the foreign wars that were supposed to avenge the September 11 attacks, still rebuilding New Orleans, and still reeling from an economic meltdown. Despite the countless hours we spent in front of television sets watching these disasters unfold, the millions of flags and other patriotic souvenirs we bought, the torrent of emotion we poured into commemorating and memorializing these events, and the many films and TV shows we watched to learn about or vicariously experience them, we remain scarred by these disasters, and in many ways, no better prepared for the next. Any attempts to improve on that reality necessarily entail a better understanding of the consumption of disaster.

Chapter One

Authenticity and the Aura of Disaster

Introduction

The emotional effects of tragic works of art have been a source of debate at least since the ancient Greeks. Plato feared the irrational emotions stirred up by tragic poetry, while Aristotle argued that poetry brought about a necessary emotional release, or catharsis, that left audiences at ease in its aftermath. Much later, the English literary critic A.D. Nuttall suggested that viewing tragedies gave audiences pleasure because it allowed them to prepare themselves for the real horrors they may one day have confronted and the psychic anguish those horrors may have caused (Nuttall, 1996). However, all of those notions of tragedy had one thing in common—the tragedies in question were fictional. As Nuttall put it, "Traditionally, most of the answers offered to the question 'Why does tragedy give pleasure?', have been founded on the essential unreality of tragic drama, on our implicit awareness that what we are looking at is a representation and not the thing itself" (Nuttall, 1996, p. 83).

Yet American mass media and popular culture are filled today with images and stories of real tragedies affecting real people. Cable television news channels and network news broadcasts, as well as print and online news outlets, ensure that real-life tragedies are frequent and consistent topics of public attention, especially when those tragedies occur on a large scale or in spectacular fashion. In addition to news reports, such tragedies and disasters typically inspire documentary films, made-for-TV movies, and Hollywood blockbusters, as well as products, services, and advertisements that express sympathy for victims, assuage public uncertainty, or offer ways of securing oneself and one's family from future calamities. Taken

together, these developments suggest that contemporary American society regularly engages in the consumption of catastrophe, through which publics become emotionally invested in the events surrounding particular disasters, and are enjoined to respond in specific ways as a result.

This has certainly been true during the past decade, in which the deadliest terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil was followed four years later by the costliest and fifth deadliest hurricane in American history and, one year and eight months later, the deadliest mass shooting in U. S. history. Only a few months later the country began to plunge into its largest financial crisis since the Great Depression. The terrorist attacks of September 11, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, and the current financial crisis have all been transformed into products within mass media and consumer culture. They have been branded and packaged by media conglomerates, major corporations, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and politicians in ways that those entities hope will resonate with audiences and consumers, and thereby prove profitable.

Yet the fact that producers have acted to commodify disasters does not, on its own, explain the appeal to consumers of such disaster-commodities, and in fact, the mediation and commodification of disaster often engenders debate and, occasionally, resistance. In each of the cases mentioned above, various segments of society struggled to understand the appeal of these disasters within popular culture, and to determine the appropriate moral and political responses. Many commentators worried that the mixture of disaster and consumerism meant that Americans were becoming too voyeuristic, or that the reality of tragic events was being lost in a hail of media hype and public spectacle. Other critics pointed to the ways in which the disasters themselves proved profitable for economic and political elites. And it is safe to say that even the most passive consumer of disaster-related media and products still engaged in processes of

interpretation and appropriation that at least slightly altered the intended meanings of these programs and commodities.

Regardless of any critical commentary, disaster-related media and products remain widely popular among American consumers, as this dissertation documents. Therefore, a better understanding of the appeal of disaster consumption requires investigating the historical context in which real tragedies, disasters, or catastrophes became fodder not only for news media but for other forms of entertainment and consumption as well. This chapter will examine the history of disaster-related media and consumerism in order to arrive at a theoretical model that helps explain the power of disasters in contemporary mass media and consumer culture. It will investigate this phenomenon without relying on the kinds of explanations focusing on voyeurism, spectacle, or simulation that are frequently employed in criticisms of media and popular culture today. After all, the preponderance of tragedy and disaster within contemporary media culture has a long history that involves more than simply the emergence of voyeuristic or sensational public appetites, and that points to conclusions somewhat more subtle than the total collapse of the real.

The historical evidence suggests that popular culture's interest in tragedy and disaster is at least as old as modernity itself, although new technologies and consumption styles have certainly increased the amount, speed, and scope of disaster coverage. There have, in fact, been important changes to the ways in which publics come to know of tragic or catastrophic events, and four related phenomena have combined over the past three centuries to create the current cultural climate towards disaster: a gradual loss of confidence in various public and private arenas of authenticity, be they art, mass communication, or individual sentiment; a growing awareness on the part of the press, the advertising industry, and governments of the need to

address this lack of confidence in their dealings with the public; developments in mass communication that have increased the speed, clarity, and variety with which consumers receive information and entertainment; and a growing, varied, and occasionally contradictory set of relationships between audiences and distant, suffering others.

While public interest in disasters may have remained fairly constant since the Enlightenment and the emergence of modern mass communication technologies, the role and meaning of disasters have changed and evolved over time. This chapter argues that Walter Benjamin's concept of "the aura" offers insights into the power of disaster consumption historically, and especially, in the present day. Although his most famous definition of the term established it as incompatible with modern forms of mechanically reproduced media, alternate iterations in Benjamin's earlier work point to a more flexible and nuanced sense of the aura that has greater contemporary implications. As authenticity has come to be in shorter supply and greater demand, the aura of disaster has become a powerful force for the generation of meaning and emotion. That power has often made disaster a unifying agent for communal experience in times of increasing fragmentation, but just as often, has established it as a source of contention and struggle within popular culture. Though commentators from Oliver Wendell Holmes (1859/ 1992) to Jean Baudrillard (1994) have remarked on the power of simulated media images, a more nuanced picture of the nature of our current mediated reality emerges by examining the various contradictions and paradoxes concerning the mediation of disasters, and the ways in which audiences have adapted to them over time.

This chapter argues that the aura or authenticity of media is not an inherent feature of older communication technologies or a mysterious quality of a handful of great works of art, but simply a trace or kernel of the real often associated with media devoted to tragic, harrowing, or

disastrous real-life events. This trace of the real is not "real" in and of itself, but rather an aesthetic that changes over time, which nonetheless signals to audiences that certain types of reactions are appropriate. In this way, a televised news report from the site of a disaster, or a moving documentary about its aftermath, or the handwritten note left behind by one of its victims may all be said to contain a kind of aura or authenticity that allows audiences to grieve as if they were also affected, to fear as if they may still be, or to exalt that they were not. However, that trace of the real is frequently watered down through the persistent reproduction of images, stories, and products that accompanies many disasters, to the point that media devoted to even the most deadly or catastrophic events eventually lose much of their perceived authenticity. Still, the minute traces of the real associated with disaster-related images and commodities can be enough to inspire all sorts of emotional responses, political decisions, and life choices. As such, this chapter will interrogate the aura concept and its relevance to disaster media, and investigate the historical emergence of a public appetite for the real that has grown, today, to the point where real disasters and death are some of the few subjects of mass culture reliably perceived as authentic.

The Aura and Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" has been highly influential in studies of art and mass communication. The term was most famously defined in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as referring to the "presence in time and space, [the] unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 220), of traditional forms of art such as sculpture or painting. Just as a tree branch or mountain range casts its shadow on the individual beneath it, the classical work of art enveloped the spectator in its aura, freeing him to abandon himself to contemplation. But the aura was, according to Benjamin, in a period of

inevitable decline and eventual disappearance because of the onset of modern techniques of reproduction such as lithography, photography, and film. By substituting a plurality of copies for a single original, and allowing artwork to enter a variety of new locations and social contexts, mechanical reproduction eliminated the powerful and absorbing spatial presence associated with authentic works of classical art.

The "Work of Art" essay was not, however, the only place in which Benjamin discussed the idea of the aura. Several of his earlier works described the concept in ways that were somewhat inconsistent with his later views of it as incompatible with modern media. Even in the artwork essay, Benjamin referred to early portrait photographs as containing "for the last time," an aura emanating "in the fleeting expression of a human face" (1969, p. 226). But the notion that early photographic portraiture might also contain a certain kind of aura had already been taken up by Benjamin in some of his earlier essays. In "Little History of Photography" and his memoirs, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," for instance, Benjamin saw the aura of photography as generated by its relation to the imagination of its viewers, not necessarily the conditions of its production (Duttlinger, 2008). The importance of imagination was tied up with the photograph's new relation to the past; more than traditional art forms, the photograph had the ability to project ghostly images from the past in ways that could strongly affect the present-day viewer. In Benjamin's view, this aura was exemplified by a haunting portrait of the photographer Dauthendey and his fiancée, who later killed herself (Hansen, 2008). Thus, in addition to its most well-known conceptualization as part of the specific spatial and historical situation of classical art, there exists an alternate view of aura in Benjamin's work that hearkens back to the word's more general associations with mysticism or the occult (Duttlinger, 2008; Hansen, 2008). In this sense, the photograph's aura stems from its ability to invoke a kind of communion with the dead,

or to portend a "premonition of future catastrophe" (Hansen, 2008, p. 342). By locating the aura in the modern art form of photography, Benjamin allowed for the possibility that mechanical reproduction did not necessarily eliminate the aura, but instead tied it to the new potentialities for being that accompanied modern technology.

Despite this alternate reading of the aura, the notion that classical art derived its power from a unique existence in space and time, and that this unique existence was ruptured by the development of modern mass production, has persisted. This idea underpins much of the literature on the rise of the public sphere; beginning with the printing press, mass production is thought to have whittled away not only the unique character of original art but also its sacred status and the claims of religious and courtly authorities over it. As Habermas put it:

> To the degree, however, to which philosophical and literary works and works of art in general were produced for the market and distributed through it, these culture products became similar to that type of information: as commodities they became in principle generally accessible. They no longer remained components of the Church's and court's publicity of representation; that is precisely what is meant by the loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character (Habermas, 2001, p. 36).

Thus, beginning as early as the mid-fifteenth century with the development of the printing press, mechanical reproduction has been associated with new, secular claims to authority, first over matters of art and culture, but eventually over civic life in general.

A variety of scholars have adopted this vision of typography as a cudgel against the entrenched control of religious authorities, and a tool for the creation of new secular forms of government. Some believe that the ascendance of print culture created a whole new form of consciousness, one that was more visual than oral and more attuned to rational, rather than magical, thinking (see McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 2002). This new form of consciousness, or at least the rapid spread of print material with which it was associated, enabled the imagining of

communities on a much larger scale than had previously been possible. To that end, Anderson has (1991) credited the power of new, mass-produced literary forms like the novel and the newspaper with the rise of nationalism. These new, national communities included a range of distant others whom one was unlikely to ever meet, but whose comradeship and fraternity were predetermined by the bonds of nationalism established through membership in a common reading public. In this way, modern print capitalism helped create not only nationalism, but the moral problem of distant suffering as well.

Suffering, the Self, and Authenticity

In a sense, the modern project has always been concerned with the elimination of suffering; modern, liberal thought is in many ways based on the premise that material deprivation can be cured by the rational organization of social life (Illouz, 2003). But as print capitalism made accounts of others' misfortunes an increasingly common feature of social life, Enlightenment thinkers grappled with the appropriate moral and political responses to the suffering of others. Adam Smith (1869) married the classic Enlightenment view of a rational, self-interested individual to a theory of moral action based on the suffering of others. He argued that the spectator of distant suffering could never truly understand what the afflicted other actually felt, but could nonetheless imagine himself in the position of the sufferer, and identify with those who offered aid or feel indignation at those who caused the misfortune. Both of these sympathetic responses, tender-heartedness and indignation, required the moral spectator to take the explicitly political action of speaking out about the suffering of which he had been made aware (Boltanski, 1999). The "pamphleteering" style of much Enlightenment literature attested to the need to speak out about suffering in a manner that was, despite its emotional subject matter, built on techniques of scientific investigation and reasoned, positivist discourse. This

ideal is exemplified in Voltaire's famous writings against the unjust executions of Jean Calas and Jean-Francois de la Barre, which resulted in the posthumous overturning of both men's convictions. Voltaire's description of the plights of these men and their families was presented as reasoned and falsifiable, based not on any personal ties or communal bonds but on a logical consideration of the plight of distant others (Ibid.).

Partly in reaction to these kinds of Enlightenment views, Rousseau focused his considerations of morality and justice on the inner life of the individual; he believed that each of us had within us a moral voice, an innate sense of right and wrong that was, unfortunately, too often clouded by pride or dependence upon the opinions of others (Taylor, 1991). Not calculation, but immediate, spontaneous sentiment was the key to morality for Rousseau (Orwin, 2008), and he found this morality best embodied in involuntary and irrepressible emotional outpourings such as crying (Boltanski, 1999). Rather than following the tradition of liberal thought that split human nature into competing elements of calculated reason and impulsive passion, Rousseau advocated a reconciliation of the rational and affective aspects of the modern individual (Ferrarra, 1993).

Rousseau's expressive, emotional approach to the misfortune of others inspired the Romantic movement's revolt against the Enlightenment, but both movements made suffering and sympathy into public issues. No longer confined to the particular families or communities of those who suffered, these became topics of concern for the entire public sphere, and the tension between reason and emotion inherent there became a defining feature of modern society. Modernity is often described in terms of the steady procession of scientific rationality through an ever-expanding proportion of social life, as in Weber's "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." However, as Campbell (1987) has shown, at the same time that the Calvinist work

ethic inspired tireless devotion to capitalist production, a Romantic ethic associated with other Protestant sects inspired increasing levels of consumer demand based on fantasy, imagination, and novelty. The "politics of pity" that emerged in this period exhibited this tension. On the one hand, accounts of the misfortunes of others required impartiality and detachment in order to be worthy of wide public attention; on the other, such accounts needed to be invested with sentiment or emotion in order to generate political commitment (Boltanski, 1999).

Some critics doubted the sincerity of these kinds of sympathetic emotional expressions, however. If actors in a theater could shed tears that did not come from the bottom of their hearts, how was one to know if ordinary people were similarly faking or misrepresenting their true emotions? The recognition of this potential for superficiality introduced a level of uncertainty about the authenticity of real-life sentimental expression, thereby calling into question the public role of sympathy as a moral principle. Although for many, the measure of one's humanity still depended on one's response to the suffering of others, thinkers like Sade and Nietzsche eventually rejected such sentimentality as a form of self-pleasure (Boltanski, 1999). As industrialization and urbanization expanded the everyday life-worlds of many Europeans and Americans to include a multitude of strangers, anxieties about the truthfulness, sincerity, and authenticity of others only increased (Balkun, 2006).

Thus, the unease with which Benjamin described the work of art's loss of authenticity had its precedent in a lingering concern with emotional authenticity that emerged in the Enlightenment, exploded in the Romantic era, and continued to grow thanks to the continued mechanical reproduction of at least one form of art—the written word. As mass production and mass media continued to grow and develop into the nineteenth century, concerns about personal authenticity and artistic authenticity became more closely entwined:

> What emerges in this period is a widespread discourse of authenticity, part of which was anxiety over the authenticity of objects: the authentic artwork, the authentic artifact, the authentic photograph, the authentic signature, the authentic heirloom. What developed as a result was a language of objects—a way of talking about "things"—that was also then used to describe the created self (Balkun, 2006, p. 8).

Although personal collections of religious relics and scientific oddities had filled curiosity cabinets in Europe since the mid-seventeenth century (Ewen and Ewen, 2006), it was in the Victorian period that many of the great European and American museums were founded, due partly to the growing concern over the authenticity or genuineness of prized artworks and artifacts in a period of growing mass production (Balkun, 2006).

As individuals were increasingly instructed by the language of advertising to improve their lives through the consumption of an expanding number of goods, media, and services, this discourse of authenticity became an increasingly problematic part of modern life. The Frankfurt school engaged in the most sustained critique of the modern tendency to foster inauthentic ways of thinking and living in the first half of the twentieth century. In the view of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/ 2002), modernity's destruction of tradition and its spread of a universal, abstract way of knowing the world necessarily created mass conformity among individuals and totalitarianism among states and institutions. They believed that in American mass culture, as in fascist political culture, the inner lives of human beings were subjected to so much measurement and control that "the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions" (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944/ 2002, p. 167).

The concern over growing conformity in American life continued throughout the 1950s. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) bemoaned the "other-directedness" encouraged by suburban consumerism, and William Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956) exposed the tendency of

corporate employees to abandon their personal lives and subsume their identities within that of the corporation. The business community was somewhat receptive to these critiques, however, and the advertising industry in particular went to work at the end of the 1950s to transform its workplace culture from the standard rational or scientific approaches to a more loose and creative model. By the time the hippies and the counter-culture appeared in the late 1960s as a challenge to America's inauthentic, establishment culture, the advertising industry was prepared to capitalize on this movement (Frank, 1998). By the 1970s, as Watergate and Vietnam broadened the appeal of the counterculture critique beyond the small ranks of hippies and into the mainstream middle class, Americans were encouraged by "self-help" books and other "caring texts" like *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to re-construct their identities in more relaxed manner that was more attuned to nature and the body (Binkley, 2007). This counter-culturally inspired set of ideals was transformed into the commercial mainstream with the growth of "values and lifestyles" marketing, the birth of yuppies, and the ascendance of brands with images focused on appeals to a more natural, authentic way of life (Levine, 2008). Thus, even as American mass culture adapted to critiques of its inauthentic, conformist tendencies, those adaptations were often spurred on by marketers and other businesses that recognized the potential profits in a more flexible and even ironic approach to selling goods and services. The idea, key to notions of authenticity since Rousseau, that one could come to truly know one's inner self, along with the modern ideal of the autonomous, self-made individual, remained subjects of increasing anxiety even as consumer culture increasingly sought to respond to those anxieties by marketing its products as more natural or authentic.

Since the mid-1970s, new systems of production and marketing characterized by increased flexibility in labor processes, greater speed of travel and geographical mobility, and

rapid shifts in consumption practices have ushered in what many consider to be a postmodern culture, characterized by a preference for superficial appearances, the surface play of images and signs, and a view of personality as a shifting pastiche of cultural references (see Harvey, 2000). Films like *Blade Runner* (1982) or *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and architecture such as the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles have been said to reflect this new, depthless culture (see Jameson, 1991). Furthermore, the increasingly flexible nature of employment, coupled with technological advances allowing for accelerated speeds of communication and travel, have created "pastiche personalities" who must constantly borrow bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available, and whose selves are constantly made and remade for an ever-expanding number of audiences (Gergen, 1991). Such a fragmentation of social life into a multitude of local roles, each with its own independent context for judging knowledge, eliminates the need for the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and modernity, according to observers like Lyotard (1984). In such a context, authenticity appears to be an outmoded criterion of judgment. "As we move into the postmodern era," Gergen argues, "'true character' seems elusive, unknowable, even irrelevant" (1991, p. 151). Postmodern art has mimicked the flat, fragmented nature of the postmodern personality, and in many cases has been inspired by the very social theories, such as Baudrillard's work on simulation, that sought to critique this epoch (Lotringer, 2005; Baudrillard, 2005).

Still, despite an aversion to the notion of authenticity among artists and social theorists, the concept has been propped up by many forces in American popular culture today, especially the publishers of the vast amount of self-help literature that has exploded in American culture since the 1970s. The postmodern fragmenting of the self has created for each individual the problem of its coherent reconstitution. As such, the self has become "belabored"—we are urged

to continually improve and remake ourselves in an effort to remain employable at a time of increasing economic uncertainty and labor-market instability. At the same time, the vast body of self-improvement literature and "makeover" television often characterizes this self-making "in the form of discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique, and stable self that might function—even thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market" (McGee, 2005, p. 16). To some extent, this is an issue at all positions in the workforce; narratives of rugged American individualism associated with the working class and softer, therapeutic views of selfhood associated with the middle or upper class both idealize a coherent vision of the self in spite of the cultural contradictions that such an ideal embodies (Brown, 2005). As the work-related demands for self-creation have increased, the family's demands on one's time and emotions have persisted, making the work of self-fulfillment a source of frequent anguish and anxiety. With the ascendance of therapeutic culture, a view of the self's coherence or authenticity as forged through suffering has come to the fore. Unlike in the Romantic era, in which only elites were engaged in appreciation for suffering, today suffering has been democratized; disease, pain, and unhappiness are now public goods on which no socio-economic class can claim a monopoly (Illouz, 2007). For instance, a pop culture icon like Oprah not only encourages her guests and audience members to understand their present-day selves as a function of traumatic events in their pasts, she consistently reveals information about her own personal struggles, failures, and suffering (Ibid). A popular culture has emerged in which the fragmented, constructed, and alienating nature of contemporary selfhood is a taken-for-granted, but nonetheless stressful, feature of everyday life.

The questions raised here about the authenticity of postmodern art and postmodern personalities are exemplified by the rise of the genre of reality television. Television programs

have incorporated various degrees of "reality" since the early 1990s in an effort to appear authentic through a more natural, unscripted tone, even though such shows normally place their non-actor stars in a variety of staged scenarios, controlled locations, and elaborate competitions. Some well-liked or infamous reality television contestants have even gone on to become minor celebrities in their own right, appearing in other reality shows as well as some scripted TV shows and motion pictures. Frequent viewers of reality television recognize the paradox inherent in these notions of authenticity, but revel in the tension between the realistic and the fantastic aspects of their favorite programs (Rose & Wood, 2006). Many times these shows intervene in the lives of ordinary families in order to teach the contestants, and by extension the audience, proper child-rearing techniques for parents in an age where the nuclear family has been cut off from extended family and community supports (Tally 2008). In other reality shows, television crews ambush unwitting participants in order to teach them how to look more fashionable and become more beautiful. In each case, as in self-help literature, the self is defined as lacking some essential feature that only a strict regimen of popular culture-inspired products, services, and lifestyle transformations can remedy (McGee, 2005).

In sum, authenticity remains a salient problem for individuals in consumer society, and thus a marketable component of commodities. The Enlightenment inaugurated the suffering of others as a political problem and a subject for mass consumption. But the ways in which mass consumption has responded to this problem, and the discourses of selfhood and identity that have resulted, have a history of flux. Benjamin's concept of the aura has the potential to illuminate the ways that current trends in mass media and popular culture combine to both support and undercut certain notions of reality and authenticity. In order to realize this potential, however, the larger and more nuanced sense of the word in Benjamin's work must be employed; its limited

definition in the "Work of Art" essay makes it difficult to apply to contemporary forms of art and media. Instead of simply viewing the aura as a technical quality of traditional artwork that disappeared in the modern era, one must recognize that much of Benjamin's work on the aura was concerned with "the possibility that the new technological media could reactivate older potentials of perception and imagination that would enable human beings to engage productively, at a collective and sensorial level, with modern forms of self-alienation" (Hansen, 2008, p. 338). The aura, then, may refer not only to what is lost in contemporary forms of mass communication, but also what is gained when those forms of communication make possible specific kinds of emotional and communal experiences.

The representation of disasters in mass media and consumer culture today exemplifies this complicated notion of the aura. On the one hand, certain iconic images from disasters continue to exhibit an uncanny power over audiences; they call forth buried traumas, invite premonitions of future catastrophes, and absorb their viewers in the kind of distant contemplation normally associated with the aura of classical art forms. On the other hand, their continued reproduction in a seemingly endless variety of forums and products throughout global consumer culture threatens to strip them of their power by bringing the images, and by extension the disaster itself, so close as to render it kitsch (see Sturken, 2007), or so familiar as to create "compassion fatigue" (see Moeller, 1999). Furthermore, images depicting disasters and the consumer products commemorating them call into question the personal authenticity of those who consume them in ways that are felt but not always clearly understood. Those unmoved by the initial images of a flooded New Orleans were surely seen as callous, but how much emotion should be expressed at these images years later? Is one who continues to surround oneself with September 11 memorabilia still genuinely grieving, or overreacting now? Are television news

anchors who breathlessly announce the latest catastrophe sincerely moved, or simply exploitative? The power of disasters as filtered through mass media and popular culture remains a topic of great debate.

Mass catastrophes have the capacity to affect the emotions of a variety of distant spectators, to call into question established notions about God, the State, science, and the individual; and of course, they can rapidly alter the physical, architectural, and social landscape of the places they afflict. For all of these reasons, disasters have been test cases for new techniques of communication and reproduction throughout modern history. The desire for increasingly timely, detailed, and widely disseminated information about disasters has been a steady force for continued innovation in modern mass communication. But especially as the growth of mass media and mass consumption have planted doubts about the authenticity of art or emotion, disaster consumption has provided a powerful link, in times of uncertainty and crisis, to the real and the authentic. The historical relationship between disasters and developments in mass consumption and mass communication therefore requires further investigation.

Disaster and the Emergence of the Public Sphere

On August 24, 79 C.E., the eruption of Mount Vesuvius destroyed the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. While hundreds and perhaps thousands of people died in those cities and the surrounding villas and towns as a result of the eruption, only one eyewitness account has survived to the present day. Almost thirty years after the events, the Roman historian Tacitus asked his friend and student Pliny the Younger to write about the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, during the eruption of Vesuvius as source material for Tacitus's own historical work. Although the portion of Tacitus's *Histories* covering these events has not survived, Pliny the Younger's two letters on the subject have (Gilman, 2007). While these accounts were

undoubtedly read by some Romans at the time, nothing that might be called consumption of this catastrophe occurred on a large scale in its immediate aftermath. The Roman Senate authorized some efforts to recover vaults and other valued property from the ruins of Pompeii in order to finance disaster relief for survivors, but the cities remained mostly buried and faded from memory until their rediscovery more than 1600 years later (Pellegrino, 2004; Stewart, 2006).

Like the ancient art and artifacts that for centuries they held secret, the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum exhibit a classical sense of the aura. Only one eyewitness account of the disaster exists, and even that is a historical artifact that was lost and then unearthed many hundreds of years later. There is a temporal gap between the calamitous events that unfolded there and the contemporary observer of the ruins that cannot be bridged, it is "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," as Benjamin might describe it (1969, p. 222). In Pompeii, evidence of life and death intertwine; amidst graffiti on the side of a brothel and footprints left by children outside a school, one finds ghostly figures trapped in their death poses. But even these are not actual human remains, rather, they are plaster and cement impressions made by filling pockets of ash where human remains had been once been. Much as Benjamin sought in *The Arcades Project* (1999) to study Paris of the nineteenth century through the "refuse" and "detritus" of daily life that the era had left behind, one can only know Pompeii and Herculaneum through the traces scattered around its ruins, traces which invite the kind of deep contemplation associated with high art by scholars like Benjamin. Pompeii absorbs the visitor and returns his gaze, as Mark Twain put it when describing his visit in 1875:

> [I] went dreaming among the trees… of this city which perished… till a shrill whistle and the cry of "All aboard—last train to Naples!" reminded me that I belonged to the 19th century, and [that I] was not a dusty mummy, caked with cinders and ashes, 1,800 years old. The transition was startling. The idea of a railroad train actually running to old dead Pompeii, and whistling irreverently, and calling for passengers in the most bustling and business-like way, was as

> strange a thing as one could imagine, and as unpoetical and disagreeable as it was strange (quoted in Pellegrino, 2004, p. 147).

Twain's description suggests the unique power of this place to evoke contemplation, not only of what happened there centuries ago, but of one's own time and place as well.

That is not to say, however, that Pompeii's aura remains as it was on the day when the ruins were first discovered. When Pompeii and Herculaneum were finally unearthed between 1738 and 1748, they emerged in a context in which mass media and mass consumption were nascent social phenomena. The sites quickly became tourist destinations for wealthy Europeans thanks to numerous published descriptions of their excavations. Victorian architects adopted the Roman styles found at Pompeii and Herculaneum in buildings as diverse as Washington's Capitol Building, California's Getty Estate, and Buckingham Palace's "Pompeiian Room." Thomas Jefferson designed silverware based on what he had seen recovered from the sites during a visit to Italy. Josiah Wedgwood's popular ceramics reproduced frescoes and sculptural scenes found in Herculaneum's Villa of the Papyri (Pellegrino, 2004; Stewart, 2006). Of course, this resurgence of interest in Ancient Rome also led to a renewed awareness of Roman law and philosophy among men like Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin, resulting in the heavy Greco-Roman influence on American political philosophy (Pellegrino, 2004). But in any case, one sees in the eighteenth century representations and recreations of Pompeii and Herculaneum examples of the beginning of the decline of aura that Benjamin associated with mechanical reproduction. These reproductions were a reflection of "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 223) that would only increase as an emerging mass-media continued to deal with the issue of disaster.

The eighteenth century's fascination with Pompeii and Herculaneum coincided to a large extent with the devastation in 1755 of Lisbon, Portugal by a powerful earthquake. Three main

shocks, and the resultant tsunami and fires, combined to kill between 10,000 and 15,000 out of a population of 275,000 (Kendrick, 1956). The discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum followed by the Lisbon earthquake served to shake the religious and philosophical foundations of all of Europe (Davis, 1998), thanks especially to the ways in which print media responded to the seemingly apocalyptic Lisbon tragedy. Many tracts and sketches were printed describing the terrifying ruins of Lisbon, and eyewitness accounts of the disaster were spread across the continent through newspapers and pamphlets. These helped to create "the illusion of proximity and unity among the peoples of different European nations," and led many central Europeans to convince themselves that they had also felt the earth shake on the day of the earthquake (Araújo, 2006).

A mass-mediated public sphere began to emerge in which new, modern ideas about the causes and meanings of natural disasters appeared to challenge traditional or superstitious beliefs. Lisbon had been widely perceived as a pious city, and the long-standing religious view that natural disasters represented God's vengeance failed to hold sway for many educated Europeans. Instead, Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, and later Kant, used the earthquake to argue against the philosophical optimism of the past and to encourage explanations of seismic activity that were scientific rather than supernatural (Dynes, 1998). Much has been made of the way the Lisbon earthquake helped to usher in Enlightenment thought, but what is less frequently emphasized is the way in which early forms of mass consumption helped steer this process. Voltaire's novel *Candide*, which used the Lisbon earthquake and other tragedies to emphasize a more pessimistic view of nature and providence, sold between 20,000 and 30,000 copies in the first year it was published, despite its denunciation by the Catholic Church (Mason, 1992). Coupled with his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," Voltaire's work addressed a large audience

across all of Europe. News of the tragedy reached Europeans not only through Voltaire's reasoned philosophical treatises but also through the somewhat sensational accounts disseminated by the press. Just as with the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the public's desire to be informed dovetailed with its desire to be entertained or to vicariously experience what life had been like during (in the Lisbon case) or before (in the case of the ancient cities) a natural disaster. In both cases, forms of consumption emerged to satisfy those desires.

The Lisbon earthquake has been called the first modern disaster, not only because it was part of an Enlightenment effort to supplant religious explanations of natural phenomena with reasoned, scientific ones. The ability of elites to capitalize on the earthquake through standardized urban planning and aggressive rebuilding marked another fundamentally modern response to disaster, exhibited for the first time in Lisbon. Portugal's secretary of state, the Marques de Pombal, used the disaster as an opportunity not only to modernize the city's structures but to cement his own power and reputation (Rozario, 2007; Kendrick, 1956). Furthermore, a third current of modern thought pulsed through the debates around the Lisbon quake: anti-modern backlash. Rousseau argued that Voltaire's views on Lisbon robbed survivors of the comforts of providence. He also argued, in what Dynes (2000) contends is the first social scientific view of disaster, that reckless build-up of overcrowded urban areas caused the terrible effects of the earthquake, not God or nature. Thus, three strands of modernity were first articulated together in the aftermath of Lisbon:

> (1) modernity as a "rational" and scientific endeavor to improve life on earth; (2) modernity as a dynamic system of spatial reorganization and capital accumulation (creative destruction); and (3) modernism as a romantic structure of feeling that values "natural" and sensational events (like disasters) as antidotes to the alienating effects of urbanization, bureaucracy, and industrialism… (Rozario, 2007, p. 14).

It is tempting to equate the emergent public sphere surrounding disasters in the eighteenth century with a loss of aura similar to the loss suffered by classical art at the hands of the literate bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas (2001). Yet the experience of disasters in the eighteenth century maintained much that might be described as authentic or unique. Only those present at the precise time and place knew the real effects of the Lisbon earthquake or any other disaster. The resulting destruction and ruins were also only really knowable to those who lived near or travelled to that place to see the aftermath. Reproduced drawings and printed firsthand accounts certainly did become available after the fact, but with nothing near the immediacy or accuracy that later mass media technologies would allow. Instead, despite the growing public appetite for accounts and depictions of catastrophe, disasters retained their unique presence in time and space, their ability to elicit a kind of contemplative spectatorship associated with the aura of classical art.

Mass production of printed materials had allowed for the dissemination of accounts of the suffering of others to an expanding number of readers, but to truly experience the kinds of sympathetic identification with sufferers lauded by Adam Smith, one had to *imagine* oneself in the role of the sufferer (Boltanski, 1999: 38-39). This emphasis on controlling one's imagination to achieve a desired emotional state exemplified what Campbell (1987) has called "autonomous, self-illusory hedonism," a phenomenon that he associates with the birth of consumerism. While Protestantism had supplied the modern West with an ethos of negative emotional control, it also served to definitively locate emotions not in the world, but in individuals, and to paradoxically encourage individuals to seek pleasure via emotional and not merely sensory stimulation (Campbell 1987). The Romantic movement inspired by Rousseau then provided the imaginative, emotional inspiration behind both the rising levels of consumer desire that accompanied

developments in mass production of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, and the increasing relevance of the suffering of others in the development of modern mass communication. While philosophers and governments began to see disasters as objects of scientific knowledge and opportunities for enlarged development and expanded powers, consumers came to view them as chances to experience emotion and to reaffirm one's own sincerity. The highly emotional character of this emerging system of mass consumption ensured that disasters would remain a popular topic for the press and other entrepreneurs. It also meant that early criticisms of the press as sensationalistic or disingenuous would resonate increasingly loudly in the years to come.

Sensationalism, Shock, and Electronic Media

Newspapers changed a great deal in the nineteenth century, thanks to declining paper costs, new color printing technologies, enhancements in the speed of delivery, and the invention of the electric telegraph (Campbell, 2001). The telegraph made long distance communication at near-instantaneous speeds, far surpassing the pace of an actual letter carrier, a reality. Gathering news via telegraph allowed newspapers to achieve previously unthinkable levels of timeliness. Before then, information about an event like the Revolutionary War was discovered by the press through no method more organized than the haphazard arrival of private letters and official or semi-official messages (Mott, 1962). There was no way of getting up-to-date information, even on events of incredible importance. The telegraph changed all that, but initially, at least in the United States, inexpensive daily newspapers like the *New York Sun* were the only papers to really utilize it. Selling on the street, rather than by subscription, and for a reduced price meant the penny press had to print news that was more timely and eye-catching than that of its more up-scale competitors. The penny press focused on crimes and scandals, leading to widespread

criticism by the establishment press of the 1830s. Still, by the 1880s, this focus became typical of most major papers in cities like New York, and use of the telegraph to relay information to newspaper publishers was commonplace (Schudson, 1978).

One of the first major American disasters to be relayed to the public with the aid of the telegraph was the Charleston, SC earthquake of 1886. The powerful quake damaged a majority of the buildings in Charleston and killed over a hundred people, while the rest of the city's inhabitants fled to the streets. Over 40,000 people were still sleeping outside a week after the quake, as severe aftershocks continued (*New York Times*, 1886). The initial quake was felt as far away as Boston, Milwaukee, and Bermuda (Steinberg, 2000). The morning after the quake, telegraph linemen were dispatched to repair the lines and return telegraph service to the city. In less than a day, the lines were repaired, and reports of the disaster went out across the region and the country (Hall, 1902). A week later, a telegram concerning the possible geological causes of the earthquake was sent over the newly laid transatlantic cable and read at the British Science Association in London (*New York Times*, 1886). But rather than simply learning the facts about the destruction, some Americans sought a more intimate experience of the earthquake. George LaGrange Cook sold copies of nearly two hundred different photographs depicting the destruction of Charleston to curious consumers (Teal, 2001), and visitors traveled to Charleston from all over the East Coast to see for themselves the spectacular devastation (Steinberg, 2000). Unlike the disaster tourism surrounding ancient sites such as Pompeii, Charleston's tourists descended on the city mere days or weeks after the disaster struck. Just as some had seen the Lisbon earthquake as a chance to improve upon the city's backward provincialism (Dynes, 1998), the business community of Charleston emphasized that the earthquake was a chance to

renew the city, to wash away "decadence" and attract rural merchants to the "newest old city in the Union" (Doyle, 1990, p. 171).

This interest in news of disaster was certainly not created by the telegraph, nor was it only apparent within journalism. Disaster had also become a recurrent theme in works of fiction in the early nineteenth century, as in Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805) and the subsequent work which it inspired, Mary Shelley's three-volume epic *The Last Man* (1826); both novels presented apocalyptic scenarios of human extinction (Davis, 1998). Edward Bulwer-Lytton's dramatic novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* enjoyed phenomenal success in 1834 after another Vesuvius eruption preceded its publication by only a few months (Simmons, 1969). It remains one of the most popular disaster novels of all time (Davis, 1998). But the press took the bulk of the early criticism for the seemingly growing public appetite for bad news. As early as 1800, William Wordsworth bemoaned the daily and hourly reports of "extraordinary incidents" that were commonplace in modern urban living, and Baudelaire made similar complaints in 1863 about the glut of newspaper reporting on wars, crimes, and other horrors (Sontag, 2003).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the thirst for timely news of disasters that had begun to reveal itself in the widely-consumed accounts of Lisbon, and probably a century earlier with the publication of shipwreck narratives (see Huntress, 1974), was slaked—or perhaps stoked—by the telegraph's ability to transmit information almost instantaneously. But the accusation of journalistic "sensationalism" that emerged in this period did not refer primarily to the speed with which news was delivered. According to Schudson (1978), such criticisms of the press focused instead on the style in which the news was displayed. "Sensationalism meant self-advertisement… anything about newspaper layout and newspaper policy, outside of basic news

gathering, which is designed to attract the eye and a small change of readers" (Schudson, 1978, p. 95). In addition to the standard tales of crime and misfortune, this penchant for self-advertisement was reflected in the aesthetic experiments of newspapers with larger fonts for headlines, imaginative illustrations and photographs, and bold layouts in which one story took over the whole front page (Campbell, 2001). Newspapers became consumer goods, concerned with advertising themselves, and increasing their ad revenues, as much as reporting the day's events. Progressives also seized on this growing taste for the sensational in a variety of "muckraking" books, newspaper exposes, and magazine articles. Although these texts assembled a large national public around important political issues, they hinted at a growing susceptibility to spectacle among the public (Ewen, 1996). Of course, the label "sensationalist" also had implications for audiences as well; it suggested that readers' or spectators' interests in a particular calamity were maudlin or voyeuristic, concerned with tawdry emotions or vicarious thrills rather than reasoned deliberation of facts.

A growing enthusiasm for natural disasters nonetheless emerged among the American public at the dawn of the twentieth century, and Americans often found themselves reveling in tales of fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Even many survivors of such calamities declared the experiences exhilarating (Rozario, 2007). Stores in New York sold a booklet that served as a key to the fire department's bell system; it allowed curious onlookers to find their way to the scene of a fire just by listening to the fire bells (Schudson, 1978). Other novel forms of disaster consumption were developing as well. From 1904 to 1911 various Coney Island amusements centered on reenactments of famous disasters such as the Johnstown, PA flood of 1889; the 1900 Galveston, TX hurricane; the 1902 volcanic eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique; and a ride where fire fighters had to save people trapped in simulated New York tenement fires (Steinberg,

2000; Sandy, 2001). The film industry has also been involved in the depiction of disaster, almost since its inception. One early British film, *The Launch of the H.M.S. Albion* (1898), captured the real-life drowning of 34 people when a landing collapsed during the ship's launch. It became the subject of much controversy when another film producer at the scene wrote an editorial against its exhibition. While documentary footage of real disasters remained a rarity for some time thereafter, real-life catastrophes remained the inspiration for many films. Bulwer-Lytton's dramatic account of Pompeii's destruction was the most filmed novel of the early years of cinema, with four movie versions made between 1903 and 1919, although these were not American productions (Davis, 1998). The American film industry began to depict disasters as well, and the American Biograph Company even produced a fake documentary of the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 by building a miniature city out of cardboard and then setting it on fire (Rozario, 2007).

The invention and widespread popularity of radio telegraphy and motion pictures at the beginning of the twentieth century, coupled with the slow but steady rise of consumer culture in general, threatened the disaster's unique presence in time and space. What might have come to replace this aura, according to Benjamin, was "shock." Aesthetic experience in the age of mechanically reproduced art such as cinema replaced the contemplative immersion of classical art with a disorienting form of almost tactile experience. In the constant flicker of images that simulate cinematic movement, and in the various edits between those sets of images, Benjamin found an analog to modern urban living. "The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change," he wrote. "This constitutes the shock effect of the film" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 238). In one note on the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin compared this shock effect to a man on a street in city traffic, and argued that "the film

is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 250, n. 19). He also drew comparisons between the sensory shock effect of new communication technologies and the moral shock effect of Dadaist artwork, with its obscene collages and crude, anti-art stance. The idea of sensationalism combines precisely these two forms of shock: sensory and moral. As new technologies of mass communication make possible new forms of human sensory experience, they also allow the dissemination of new kinds of information that many find unsettling or offensive. The effect is a kind of disorientation, "an experience of estrangement which then requires recomposition and readjustment" (Vattimo, 1992, p. 51). If one equates sensationalism with Benjamin's notion of shock, one finds much support for the idea of a loss of aura associated with disasters at the turn of the twentieth century.

One of the most famous disasters in history, the sinking of the Titanic, first shocked the American public via the new technology of wireless telegraphy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more ships were equipped with this early form of radio in the hopes of preventing maritime disasters (Barnouw, 1966). On April 15, 1912, a 21-year-old telegraph operator stationed at the Wanamaker department store in New York heard a faint signal coming over the wireless with the message "S.S. Titanic ran into iceberg. Sinking fast." The operator, David Sarnoff, gave the information to the press, alerted other ships he could reach, and established communications with the Carpathia after that ship had picked up the Titanic survivors. Sarnoff stayed at his post until a complete list of survivors had been relayed seventy-two hours later; by that time the Wanamaker store was filled with policemen holding back a crowd of reporters, friends and relatives of passengers, and curious onlookers (Barnouw, 1966; Heyer, 1995). The event made Sarnoff famous and launched an illustrious career in which he

went on to head the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and found the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), although many now suggest that parts of that story are exaggerated or apocryphal (see Museum of Broadcast Communications, n.d.).

The Titanic's almost mythic place in history is taken for granted today, but it is worth reiterating that the sinking of the unsinkable ship was enshrined in popular culture through myriad forms of mass consumption occurring with an unprecedented rapidity relative to previous disasters and catastrophes (Heyer, 1995). A seemingly endless flow of commentary and reflection began almost as soon as radio waves containing word of its impending sinking reached the shore. New York newspapers initially speculated on whether or not the ship had truly sunk or was simply being towed back to shore by the Carpathia—initial wireless reports were unclear on this matter. For instance, the April 15 issue of the *Syracuse Herald* ran the headline "Titanic's Passengers All Rescued" above a giant drawing of passengers in lifeboats amidst a choppy sea with the Titanic looming large in the background, a broken steam pipe its only visible sign of damage (see *Titanic Newspaper Archive*). On the other hand, *The New York Times* made its journalistic reputation partly through its coverage of the Titanic, which the paper correctly surmised had sunk at a time when rival publications were still cautiously optimistic. In its widely praised coverage, *The Times* examined a variety of hypothetical scenarios concerning the crash and rescue, and published speculative opinions gleaned from interviews with maritime experts in order to tell Titanic's story before the Carpathia had even returned (Heyer, 1995). But the story of the Titanic was told, and sold, to the public through more than just newspapers; survivors' accounts, novels, poems, plays, songs, and films told the story to an enthralled audience. Actress Dorothy Gibson, a real-life Titanic survivor, wrote and starred in a short silent film in which she retold the story of her escape and rescue to a group of actors portraying her family. The film was

shot in a week and debuted less than a month after the Titanic sunk. Literary figures such as Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Thomas Hardy published a series of responses to the great tragedy. Even blues legend Leadbelly performed a song called "De Titanic" that told a fictional tale about heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson being prevented from boarding the doomed ocean liner by its racist white passengers (Ibid).

In many ways, the Titanic catastrophe has become a kind of archetype of disaster consumption. Today, new technologies continue to be used to increase the speed with which information about disasters is transmitted to the public. News agencies continue to blend speculative elements with factual news reporting. Firsthand accounts from survivors are still emphasized, and eye-catching images are given as much prominence as the stories themselves. Novels, plays, films, and other kinds of pop culture still dramatize or fictionalize the spectacular events surrounding catastrophes. And strong emotional reactions from audiences remain important, and expected, in the consumption of contemporary catastrophes. It is tempting to see the consumption of the Titanic tragedy as an example of the substitution of shock for aura that Benjamin associated with mechanical reproduction. Critics like Postman (1985) adopt such a view, in which electronic telegraphy is the first of many modern communication technologies to place immediacy over content, to eschew careful exposition in favor of a "peek-a-boo" world of various short-lived events and sensations. In this view, the decline of the aura of the written word precludes any meaningful engagement with the social world in general, and disasters in particular.

But there are also important ways in which the Titanic disaster maintains a kind of aura, even with its hyper-mediated and over-consumed legacy. The ship's mythic place in modern culture as a cautionary tale about technologically induced hubris has imbued it with a kind of

ritualistic power similar to the ritual function that Benjamin associated with classical art. Moreover, the ship's brief and tragic history has retroactively endowed the few photographs of it with the kind of haunting quality that Benjamin has also identified with the aura. The same can be said for other Titanic memorabilia, and especially for the sunken ship itself, which remained lost until 1985. Even though the wreckage of the Titanic has since been scoured by both treasure-hunters and Hollywood directors, as in James Cameron's 3-D IMAX film *Ghosts of the Abyss* (2003), Postman's argument that electronic media have rendered meaningful interaction with real-life events impossible rings somewhat hollow. If the development of electronic communication technologies has stifled certain possibilities for reasoned exposition, a dubious claim in and of itself, it has also made possible new forms of identification and emotional connection with an ever-increasing number of distant others, and it has done so in ways that are not limited to the literate upper classes. Today, anyone can purchase authentic pieces of coal recovered from the wreck, or reproductions of *The New York Times* headlines from its sinking, or original Titanic stock certificates, and at least potentially use these products to more deeply reflect on the disaster.

This democratizing aspect of mass communication and consumption has had its own critics, however, especially in relation to disasters. As early as 1841, journalist Charles Mackay had compiled a historical account of various "popular delusions" resulting from the gregarious, suggestible nature of mankind (Mackay, 1841/ 1980). But with the growth of mass democracy and the popular press, this penchant for delusion became more problematic. Gustave LeBon viewed such behavior as a tendency toward mob mentality and argued that the throngs of lower class voters had become a dangerous, irrational element of democratic society (LeBon, 1895/ 1960). Psychologists like Freud and Wilfred Trotter built on and critiqued LeBon's analysis;

Trotter saw the "herd instinct" as a natural function of human evolution, while Freud saw mass suggestibility as the result of powerful libidinal ties formed between group members and certain leaders who functioned as ego-ideals for the rest of the group (Trotter, 1919/ 1953; Freud, 1921/ 1959). Following Freud, the implications of mass irrationality for governments and markets became important concerns of men like John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, and Edward Bernays. Although Dewey championed the decision-making ability of the people, Lippmann believed that enlightened social scientists and technocrats had to steer public policy away from the frivolity of the masses, while Bernays accepted the public's irrationality and developed psychological techniques of persuasion for use in the emerging field of public relations (Ewen, 1996).

The supposed irrationality of the masses was on display in 1938 when Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast convinced millions of Americans that an alien invasion was underway. In *The Invasion from Mars* (1940), sociologist Hadley Cantril performed an extensive survey of radio listeners to try to determine what kinds of social and economic factors affected listeners' responses to the simulated catastrophe. This study, which argued that those who panicked in the face of the broadcast lacked "critical ability," has been highly influential in subsequent sociological debates concerning mass panic during disasters, although its methodology has more recently been called into question (Quarantelli, 2001). Though nineteenth century newspapers had frequently featured outlandish hoax stories, which they would later reveal as false to the amusement of their readership (see Goodman, 2008), Welles' broadcast directly called into question the authenticity of human emotions generated by mass media. By mimicking the aesthetic features of a real news bulletin while making the actual content of the news an almost obvious fabrication, Welles exposed the possibility that audiences were only responding to the form and style of news stories, rather than their content.

This tendency towards irrationality in the face of crisis added weight to concerns over mass conformity. Coupled with the rise of fascism and the growing sophistication of mass propaganda in Germany and the United States, this era engendered a loss of trust in the authenticity of mass communication and the genuineness of the emotional responses it solicited (Ewen, 1996). The shock of new media technologies became associated not only with a sort of inflamed sensationalism, but also with trauma, with a benumbing of individual consciousness in the face of the overwhelming machinery of modernity and its instruments of persuasion. "Perceptions that once occasioned conscious reflection were now the source of shock impulses which consciousness must parry" (Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 104). But the coming decades would seek to salve the traumas inflicted by World War II with the promise of almost utopian abundance contained in exploding levels of American mass consumption.

Disaster Consumption and Contemporary Consumer Culture

The Second World War merged disaster, mass media, and consumption in some definitive ways. Many millions died during the course of the war, including over 400,000 Americans, and this global disaster was the subject of novel forms of mass media and consumerism that have had a lasting impact on the country and the world. To begin with, new media technologies enabled the practice of propaganda to reach its apotheosis during the war, both in the United States and in Germany. Techniques of persuasion pioneered in the First World War and honed during FDR's vast publicity push in support of the New Deal were utilized to their fullest during World War II by writers, moviemakers, broadcasters, and other mass media elites under the direction of the Office of War Information (OWI). After the widespread anti-big-business sentiment of the Great Depression, "war and the attendant need to stir feelings of national solidarity were, once again, supplying a state-of-the-art laboratory where business could

experiment with the tools of ideological command. Conscientiously applied, many businessmen believed, the lessons of war might carry over into peace" (Ewen 1996, p. 341).

Although the foundations for this effort were laid earlier, Hollywood began heavily producing war-related films immediately after Pearl Harbor. Within six months, nearly a third of the features in production dealt with the war, and in the four years of American participation in the war between 20% and 28% of Hollywood films dealt with the subject. The content of these films was supervised by the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures in order to ensure patriotic themes, but Hollywood generally needed little coercion to aid the war effort. Domestically, many movie theaters transformed into wartime community centers, housing charities like the March of Dimes and the Red Cross, selling war bonds for the U.S. Treasury, and becoming collection sites for blood plasma, copper, scrap metal, and other materials important to the war effort. Internationally, the studios worked with the government to set up a worldwide distribution system, sending thousands of prints to military bases that served millions of servicemen and women (Schatz, 2006).

Wartime investment in mass production put more money in the pockets of Americans still dealing with the lingering effects of the Great Depression, but it also introduced new kinds of material scarcity, as the war effort required rationing and recycling of many products. The government instituted various price-control systems, and Americans were encouraged to tightly manage their consumption, invest in war bonds, and save their extra money until the war was over. Still, American spending on non-durable goods like movies, meals in restaurants, and liquor increased even in this period of intense, nationalistic thrift (Cohen, 2003). The military enlisted broadcasters' help in getting celebrities to go on the radio to encourage support for these everyday consumption choices. In return, businesses were allowed to continue the somewhat

controversial practice of deducting their advertising costs from their taxes. This was a boon to radio broadcasters, as major companies—even ones like General Motors whose wartime production demands left them with no cars to sell—bought radio advertisements and sponsorships simply to maintain their public presence (Barnouw, 1978). When the war ended and manufacturers "reconverted" to production of domestic rather than military goods, thrifty citizens were encouraged by government and business to spend their savings, lest the economy contract again to Depression-like levels. Americans answered the call, buying refrigerators, cars, and suburban homes in record numbers and inaugurating an ideal of interconnected economic abundance and democratic freedom that Cohen (2003) has called "The Consumers' Republic." Just as wartime had required thriftiness on the part of Americans, post-war America quickly enshrined spending as the new patriotism. Both periods reflected the new idea that one's consumption choices not only expressed nationalistic pride, but actually provided material aid to the nation in times of peril. But the post-war period also began a period of declining consumer caution, in which products and brands were scrutinized less for the conditions under which they were produced and more for the pleasures they could provide or the lifestyles they signified (Zukin, 2005).

America in the midst of post-war suburbanization has been mythologized as a period of stability and calm. This era did see fewer of the deadly domestic disasters that plagued the United States around the turn of the century: the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 killed between 6,000 and 15,000 people, and the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 killed between 3,000 and 6,000, while no subsequent twentieth century natural disaster claimed nearly as many lives. Americans continued, however, just as they had at the end of the nineteenth century, to populate geographical areas prone to natural disasters, a fact to which the federal government

eventually responded with the Disaster Relief Act of 1950. Under the terms of the Act, the U.S. government assumed responsibility for disaster reconstruction across the nation (Steinberg, 2000). This essentially established the government as an underwriter of the risk associated with increased development in flood- and storm-prone areas, enabling increased suburban expansion as well as new construction in many coastal areas that became desirable vacation destinations. In this way, many aspects of typical middle-class American consumption patterns emerged out of the disaster of World War II and the federal government's postwar policies.

The gradual ascendance of television journalism in this period also changed Americans' experience of tragedies and disasters, though to many observers, the power of film and television to disseminate news and, by extension, to create spectacle was not fully realized until the 1960s. "John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon on television; Lee Harvey Oswald was shot on television; presidents dissembled, protestors protested, in front of cameras, indeed with their eyes fixed upon cameras" (Stephens, 1988, p. 282). The Kennedy assassination and the events surrounding it became seminal moments in American history, and they provided a dramatic turning point in the mass-mediated consumption of tragedy and disasters. Not only did film and television bring the story of Kennedy's assassination in increasing detail to an incredibly large audience, but these media themselves became part of that story.

John F. Kennedy, the "television president," was widely believed to have won the 1960 election because of his understanding of that emerging medium. Just as his skillful embrace of TV helped legitimize his presidential candidacy, it also led in some ways to television's legitimization as an instrument of political discourse. Even many television journalists considered TV news an inferior counterpart to print media at the beginning of Kennedy's ascent to the presidency (Zelizer, 1992). But the assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963

cemented the position of television as the primary news-disseminating apparatus in American life. Most of the press initially on-site in Dallas were corralled in two busses at the time of the assassination, so the coverage of the shooting began not as it happened but immediately afterwards. Only one Associated Press (AP) photographer witnessed and photographed the event: James Altgens stood only fifteen feet away when the president was shot, close enough to nearly be struck by fragments of Kennedy's head, and shocked enough to miss the moment of impact despite having already focused his camera (Lubin, 2003). Still, his photo of a Secret Service agent climbing over the back of Kennedy's limousine was transmitted to the AP twenty-five minutes after the shooting, and ended up on the front page of thousands of newspapers across the globe the next day. On the other hand, Walter Cronkite had already interrupted CBS's regular television broadcast ten minutes after the shots had been fired to inform the audience of this attack on the President's motorcade. More than half of the nation, and as many as 68% by one estimate, had heard news of the shooting before Kennedy was even pronounced dead (Zelizer, 1992; Stephens, 1988).

Though print and radio journalists worked alongside and together with television journalists in the harrowing hours and days following the assassination, television inserted itself into the story more prominently than these other media. Two days after Kennedy's death, Jack Ruby emerged from a crowd of reporters, photographers, and cameramen to shoot suspected assassin Lee Harvey Oswald as Oswald was being transferred to county jail. This marked the first time that a real homicide was carried on live television (Zelizer, 1992), and it occurred in the midst of three days of non-stop television news coverage of the aftermath of the assassination. Such an abandonment of normal TV format has remained, in the years following, a

signal of very important news (Gans, 1979). The culmination of this coverage was Kennedy's funeral, which 93% of Americans viewed live on television (Zelizer, 1992).

Kennedy's assassination inaugurated an era in which the tragic, disastrous, and catastrophic would frequently be caught on camera and often broadcast live on television. The ascendance of television news, and the increasing ubiquity of TV, film, and video cameras in contemporary life has not only enabled such frequent broadcasts of macabre events, it has also created the expectations that such events should and will be televised. Twenty-four hour news networks, which appeared first in 1961 on the radio and on television in 1980, require an even greater surfeit of events to cover, and bleak or tragic news stories are rarely in short supply. "With the vast pool of occurrences available to modern news organs, our ancestors' need to be alert to potential threats is now satisfied by daily, hourly immersions in a selection of tragedies so unrelievedly black that the world itself, always grim when viewed through the news, may appear to actually have darkened" (Stephens, 1988, p. 291).

In one sense, iconic photographs of disasters and other tragedies have become taken for granted aspects of daily, mass-mediated life. David Lubin argues that "these images are so famous that they have in a sense become invisible" (2003, p. xi). It is tempting to see this familiarity as the decline of any kind of aura. And yet, the Kennedy assassination also provided the world with a single, twenty-six second piece of film that has contained almost all of the unique characteristics that Benjamin associated with that concept. The Zapruder film was once a heavily guarded, mysterious, almost sacred artifact. Its hauntingly tragic subject matter and almost premonitory quality regarding the assassinations five years later of Martin Luther King Jr. and the president's brother, Robert F. Kennedy, attest to the intangible, absorbing qualities of this piece of film.

Although it was recorded on the date of the assassination in 1963, the public did not get its first nationally televised view of the Zapruder film until 1975. *Life* magazine had purchased the film from Abraham Zapruder shortly after the assassination for the sum of $150,000, and three copies of the initial negative were made, with one going to the magazine, one to Zapruder, and one to the Secret Service. For over a decade after that, the film appeared only as a selection of still frames in the pages of *Life*, or to small audiences with special clearance, like government investigators or the jury in Jim Garrison's trial of Clay Shaw, famously depicted in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991). However, bootleg copies of the film began to appear in the hands of conspiracy theorists and in college lecture halls not long after its creation. A photo technician named Robert Groden had covertly made a copy of the film when working on it for *Life* in 1968, and had optically enhanced it to provide clearer details of the shots hitting the president. This higher-resolution version was finally shown to the nation on *Good Morning America* by Geraldo Rivera in April of 1975 (Lubin, 2003; Simon, 1996).

The 11 years between its filming and its first national exhibition suggest that the Zapruder film had an aura very much akin to Benjamin's definition in "The Work of Art" essay. Benjamin believed that, as part of the aura's decline, mechanical reproduction freed art from its ritual function and the social spaces controlled by religious authorities. Unlike the new mechanically reproduced art, auratic art had often remained hidden from the public: "Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 225). But the history of the Zapruder film suggests that even the modern, mechanically reproduced art form of film can create objects with certain similarly cloistered or secret qualities. Though just 26 seconds long, the film appeared only in still

fragments, or to small bands of authorized elites, or in underground settings organized by bootleggers, for the first decade of its existence. Like a statue in a cella, or a covered Madonna, the Zapruder film gained its uniquely powerful status precisely because it remained hidden from public view. And like the religious relics exhibited at irregular intervals for only brief periods of time by churches in the Middle Ages (see Ewen & Ewen 2006; Man, 2002), a grieving nation believed that the Zapruder film might contain healing powers—in this case the power to heal the wounded trust in government which rampant conspiracy theories belied. It also required a kind of religious faith; not in God or government, but in the power of film, and vision more generally, to capture truth (Simon, 1996). As an inversion of the cult of the beautiful associated with classical art, these 26 seconds of celluloid were believed to contain truth precisely because of their stark, unadulterated recording of a brutal murder. This same claim to truth or authenticity explains the appeal of disaster consumption today as well.

Once the film had been publicly televised, and *Life* had relinquished its copyright claims, this faith in visual truth was tested by numerous reinterpretations based on careful forensic measurement, further technological enhancement, and continued frame-by-frame dissection. An audio recording made from Dallas police radio broadcasts at the time of the shooting was also eventually added to the mix and pored over by acoustics experts and assassination buffs (Simon, 1996). But in the end, the film offered proof of theories involving multiple-assassin conspiracies as well as a lone gunman, depending on who analyzed it. Over time, the reproduction and dissemination of these images, which had been long delayed, managed to modify the public perception of the Zapruder film. But it did not destroy its arresting power.

The Zapruder film today maintains a kind of authenticity despite its ubiquity throughout popular American culture. Though overly familiar to most Americans, and thus no longer

containing an aura in the style of some hidden artifact, the images have a haunting presence and legacy akin to Benjamin's other definitions of the term. The "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may appear" is no longer about the film's distance from public consumption, but its stubborn obfuscation of truth, its mysterious ability to hide the real story seemingly in plain sight. The film haunts us today as the frustratingly indecipherable key to solving an ancient mystery, an unintelligible whisper from beyond the grave. Its frequent reproduction in magazines, television programs, forensic reenactments, documentaries, and Hollywood movies—and the iconic status that such reproductions reinforce—has not dulled the spectral, mysterious aura of the film. Not only does it serve as a reminder of Kennedy's unfulfilled promise and his tragic demise, but it carries the added weight of a failed warning about the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy as well. The tragic assassinations of that five-year period, the hint of what America might have been if those bullets had missed their targets, the sadness of a generation still traumatized by them: all of it crystallized in one small bit of celluloid whose ghostly images have been disseminated across the globe today.

Of course, the Kennedy assassination, and his presidency in general, have generated a host of other media products and consumables. As Art Simon put it, "perhaps no set of imagery has toured the cultural landscape as much as that referring in some way to the death of JFK" (Simon, 1996, p. 1). JFK commemorative coins, Christmas ornaments, pocket watches, utensils, and apparel are sold in many places, including the John F. Kennedy Presidential Museum and Library, and works of art like Warhol's series of "Jackie" prints from 1963 to 1964 and Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* (1991) attest to the wide influence of the assassination throughout the culture industry over a long period of time. Thus, as with the Titanic tragedy, the JFK assassination has been spun off and packaged for mass consumption in a variety of forms. Imagery surrounding

the assassination has even been re-appropriated in order to shock or transgress, as in the 1992 concert poster by Frank Kozik that altered the image of Lee Harvey Oswald at the moment of his own assassination to look like the photograph of a rock and roll band. In it, a wincing Oswald appears to be singing into a microphone, Jack Ruby holds a guitar, and a keyboard player stands behind them.

But how can consumption of such crass, cheap, or kitschy memorabilia really have anything to do with the aura? Isn't this an example of "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly," which Benjamin said reflected "their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (Benjamin, p. 223)? I want to suggest that even this kind of consumption may maintain an indexical trace of the real, the disastrous, the traumatic, and that the nature of modern consumerism actually ensures that even these sorts of objects maintain that "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," which is characteristic of Benjamin's aura. At the very least, such commodities' connections to real tragedies allow consumers to imagine them as authentic. Since, as Campbell (1987) reminds us, consumption is partly based on consumers' imagined relationships with the things they consume, then the connection to the real at the heart of disaster consumption is 'real in its consequences,' to borrow from sociologist W.I. Thomas. Moreover, the imagined authenticity of disaster images and products allows consumers to engage in deeper emotional and imaginative relationships with these commodities—one's fear, grief, anxiety, and empathy are appropriately expressed in even the most outlandish forms of consumerism when such consumerism is connected to a recent disaster.

In sum, the assassination of JFK ushered in a new set of relationships between aura and disaster. Disasters have become more and more likely to be captured on film, radio, or television

as they happen. The power of live televised news broadcasts, showcased in the events surrounding the assassinations of Kennedy and Oswald and at Kennedy's funeral, has inaugurated a push towards increasing use of live news, and eventually, the first of what are now many 24-hour TV news networks. And with the growth of media technology at the consumer level, "citizen journalists" as they are called today—and of which Abraham Zapruder may have been the first—are often the ones who actually capture the most shocking, powerful, or iconic images of disaster. Accompanying these developments have been an increasing commercialization, recycling, and reproduction of disasters in consumer culture, and a growing audience who also feels itself upset, moved, or even traumatized by the vicarious, mediated experience of disaster. Thus was born the contemporary model of disaster consumption: artifacts and images from the moment or scene of the disaster maintain a haunting aura, an authentic quality derived from the unfathomable magnitude or significance of the tragedy that they represent, and yet such authenticity makes a disaster the subject of constant reproduction and consumption that attempts to trade on its significance for power and profit.

Using the Kennedy assassination as the model for contemporary disaster consumption does, however, expand the definition of disaster; while Kennedy's death was certainly a tragedy of immense weight and significance, is it really the same as the large-scale destruction of life and/or property that we usually associate with the term disaster? I believe that it is, though not, perhaps, for communities actually affected by a disaster. In terms of popular culture, individual tragedies and large-scale disasters are presented and consumed in very similar ways. The last thirty or forty years have in fact borne witness to an expanding definition of victimhood and trauma. Although McGee has asserted that self-help culture in the 1970s preached a specific avoidance of psychological victimhood (McGee, 2005), this appears to have given way to a

wider recognition and acceptance of victim status. For instance, Oprah Winfrey's talk show, and the host of similar shows that it has inspired, encourages its guests to construct narratives of the self framed by suffering or trauma. This suffering or trauma is not usually caused by earthquakes or wars but by the personal relationships and entanglements of everyday life. In this way, even as her audience is directed to feel pity towards her guests, Oprah limits the distance between sufferers and non-sufferers (Illouz, 2003). In such a culture, it is no surprise that "victim stories" have become a common feature of most television news broadcasts; they play on the recognition that our daily lives are subject to horrible disruptions at a moment's notice (Langer, 1992). Thus, an odd equivalency exists between mass disasters and individual tragedies; both hint at the ever-present possibility of some kind of victimization, and both can produce the same kind of vicarious emotional responses in viewers.

In today's hyper-mediated pop culture landscape, even those who simply view images of traumatic events can lay claim to being traumatized themselves (see Kaplan 2005). The idea of vicarious, media-induced trauma amounts to an expansion of the aura to include live, televised events. That is, after all, the basis of the national exercises in mourning surrounding the Kennedy assassination or a later tragedy like the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion. Though far fewer people died in the *Challenger* than in the *Titanic* sinking, the 1986 tragedy dominated popular culture and the national consciousness in much the same way. However, the *Challenger* exploded on live TV in front of millions of school children who were watching the launch during school hours in connection with the "Teacher-in-Space" program. An estimated 40% of late elementary and secondary school children in the United States witnessed the launch live on TV, and 95% of Americans had watched some of the Challenger explosion on television by the end of the day (Zinner, 1999). Within hours of the explosion, President Reagan, another leader

known for his skillful use of television, set the tone for national mourning with a televised speech. The Teacher-in-Space program had been his proposal, and the charismatic "teachernaut" Christa McAulliffe had already been introduced to the nation through a series of televised interviews in the run-up to the launch, making his words all the more affecting. Like the many other "pseudo-events" (see Boorstin, 1967/ 1987) of dubious importance with which public culture is populated today, the Teacher-in-Space program was designed specifically as a public relations mission. In an irony likely to be repeated in future tragedies, the heavy public relations efforts leading up to the launch contributed extra attention to the mission's disastrous outcome.

In the aftermath of the catastrophe, the hometowns of the various crewmembers built a variety of local memorials, and a national memorial was constructed at Arlington National Cemetery (Zinner, 1999). As with Kennedy's assassination, a government investigation ensued, focusing eventually on defective "O-rings" and the culture of groupthink pervading NASA. But one somewhat overlooked aspect of the investigation was the fate of the crewmembers' bodies. The live footage of the fiery explosion made it seem as if the shuttle and crewmembers had been incinerated mid-air, but in fact the crew compartment had hurtled in a three-minute long free-fall into the ocean, where it was later recovered. NASA's original transcript of the voice recorder omitted pilot Michael Smith's final "Uh oh," and NASA only later revealed that some of the crew members had actually used their emergency air packs during the descent, suggesting that some of the shuttle passengers may have been alive and conscious as they fell to earth—a fact that neither NASA nor the government's investigators were willing to admit (Larabee, 2001). Many Americans saw NASA's official position as part of a cover-up, and news agencies sued under the Freedom of Information Act to get access to the crew's voice recordings (Zinner, 1999). Resistance to this narrative about the accident and the pompous mass-mediated reverence

surrounding it emerged in other, less-official ways as well, such as the many crude *Challenger* jokes spread by word of mouth in the disaster's aftermath (Larabee, 2001).

Thus, even images with the kind of haunting, tragic aura of the Challenger's mid-air explosion leave doubt as to their veracity and the authenticity of the responses of the viewing or consuming public. How much is it appropriate to grieve for people one has never met? Is it legitimate to feel that one has been traumatized simply by watching a catastrophe unfold on a screen? What kinds of consumption of memorial or commemorative products are acceptable and what kinds are overwrought, showy, or gaudy? And how much can we even trust what we see on the screen? After all, the harrowing images of the Challenger's explosion revealed little about the bureaucratic and technological causes behind the tragedy, and even confused the whereabouts of the crewmembers' bodies. If these images maintain an aura today, it is due to the mysteries they conceal, the unfathomable last seconds of the crew members that one cannot help but think about, the grief of family and friends watching from the ground, and the communal experience of instantaneous loss suffered by so many that day: all of this remains embedded, at least in traces, in the well-worn images of the ship's explosion and the various forms of commemoration which continue to call them forth.

In an age of niche marketing and political fragmentation, the ability to call forth such strong emotions from such wide audiences is rare. As Charles Taylor put it, "A fragmented society is one whose members find it harder and harder to identify with their political society as a community. This lack of identification may reflect an atomistic outlook, in which people come to see society purely instrumentally. But it also helps to entrench atomism, because the absence of effective common action throws people back on themselves" (Taylor, 1991, p. 117). While not necessitating any individual action, the affective strength of disaster pulls people together,

reaffirms the bonds of community, nation, and humanity that are usually viewed as being in decline. In fact, image-based media can often do this in ways that print media cannot, by "providing resources for thought and feeling that are not registered in the norms of literate rationality that constitute the discourse of political legitimacy in Western societies" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 14). But of course, as was particularly evident after September 11, the general scarcity of such communal sentiment in contemporary American culture makes the aura of disaster a valuable commodity for those who wish to manipulate public opinion, be they advertisers or government officials.

Conclusion: Contemporary Disaster Consumption and the Aura

Recently the trend among scholars and cultural critics has been to argue that media culture has grown increasingly focused on the tragic and disastrous, often elevating minor events to disproportionately high levels of public concern through incessant multi-media hype. Herbert Gans (1979) found that journalists were worried about inducing panic and disorder, and tried to steer clear of reporting that they thought would encourage such behavior, but the "moral panic" literature in sociology and criminology, beginning with Cohen's (1972) seminal study of the misguided British panic over violent youth gangs, suggests otherwise. By 1999, Glassner had argued credibly that the media was inducing a "culture of fear" by drumming up anxieties over a host of largely invented crises and threats. Similar arguments have also been made by Furedi (1997) and Stearns (2006), to name just a couple, though these arguments are not very different from turn-of-the-century concerns over journalistic sensationalism. They all take the position that new technologies enable greater manipulation of public emotions, in ways which prevent reasoned or rational consideration of facts, or of more important but less exciting news stories. Although consumer culture does certainly rely on increasingly high levels of spectacle (see

Ritzer, 1999), consumers may also grow accustomed to, and thus less affected by, media technologies and consumption styles over time. Radio broadcasts and color photographs were once accused of the same deleterious, panic-inducing effects as twenty-four-hour cable news channels and Hollywood disaster movies, though the former are now seen as antiquated or unremarkable. This gradual inducement to complacency is the reverse side of contemporary media criticism; instead of frenzy and panic, some critics cite the media's erosion of affect, its generation of "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999), or "empty empathy" (Kaplan, 2005). The question then becomes how to reconcile these two perspectives; are we too concerned with disasters, or not concerned enough? Is our concern empty or genuine?

In reality, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The contemporary state of disaster consumption hints at new conceptions of authenticity and genuineness that encompass, or perhaps circumvent, both views. Understandings of authenticity often begin with the notion that authentic experiences are unmediated, un-reproducible, locked in a particular time and space. In the face of such a position, the only response to the spread of mass media and consumer culture has been to suggest that nothing is authentic any longer, that the world is increasingly artificial or simulated (see Debord, 2006; Baudrillard, 1994). But this is precisely what makes disasters and tragedies such an important part of contemporary consumer culture. They provide the hint of a longed-for connection to reality; they resonate by frightening, mystifying, or titillating, but always with the prospect of real loss, real death. As new media technologies and consumer culture have cast doubt on the authenticity of human experience and emotion, the baseline authenticity of disasters has become that much more valuable. As Slavoj Zizek put it, "the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre" (Zizek, 2006, p. 93). Contemporary popular culture has set in motion a dialectical frenzy where

the phenomenon of authenticity that producers, marketers, and politicians hope to capture is the same phenomenon they end up nearly destroying through endless reproduction. But rather than a destruction of the real or the aura, the consumption of catastrophe today reveals an ongoing struggle over the undeniable kernel of reality that stubbornly persists in disasters, often despite their continued reproduction and mediation. In such a context, consumers of catastrophe are neither naïve nor prurient; they are simply drawn to the traces of authenticity that make catastrophes stand out from the rest of a hyper-mediated, seemingly inauthentic culture.

The kernel of authenticity at the heart of a disaster transcends the conditions of its reproduction in media culture, at least for the most powerful disasters. Benjamin found this transcendent aura in early photographs, where "the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 510). One sees the same traces of the here and now, the same seared markers of reality, in the Zapruder film, or the footage of the Challenger explosion, and in iconic photographs from Vietnam such as "Accidental Napalm," in which a young Vietnamese girl runs naked and screaming due to the burns on her back and arms. That same trace of reality, that aura of disaster is also apparent in the incredible array of images from September 11, as well as certain footage of flooded New Orleans streets and stranded rooftop survivors during Hurricane Katrina. In these cases, the disaster as a multi-media event in and of itself may be the seat of the aura: it is not so much one image but the sum total of these shots, their blending or composite in individual recollections and collective memory. But the determining factor here is not the technology with which images of disaster are produced, but the context in which they are apprehended. As Duttlinger (2008) and Hansen (2007) have argued, aura may refer to an imaginary encounter between viewer and image, a haunting and

destabilizing interaction with even mechanically reproduced imagery; by this definition, the aura obtains even in contemporary multi-mediated disasters.

As such, the central problem of contemporary disaster consumption is not the inauthenticity of disaster consumption, or of those engaged in it, but the ability of political elites to frame a narrow range of emotional or political responses as the only appropriate ones. The consumption of catastrophe is most threatened, or perhaps most threatening, when dominant interests are able to channel the wide range of emotions surrounding disasters into a few politically useful contexts. The aura of disaster is not only a source of deep emotion for audiences and victims, it is a contested terrain, a site of struggle for control over the fleeting essence of reality itself, but as this dissertation will show, over the past decadee that contest has tended to heavily favor elite interpretations and definitions.

Since the Enlightenment, the importance of genuine emotional responses to the suffering of others has been a subject of public discussion and debate. In the intervening centuries, the contours of that debate have changed alongside new developments in media technology and new styles of consumer culture, but always some belief in the possibility of an authentic public reaction has obtained, even if that possibility seemed a diminishing one. This remains true today, at a time when consumer culture puts a premium on authentic selfhood despite the doubt cast on the entire notion of authenticity by modern and postmodern critics of media culture. Disasters partially resolve this problem by providing, at least in extreme cases, cultural products with an undeniable relation to reality, regardless of their mediation or reproduction. Emotional investment in such cultural products has become accepted and even expected, precisely because of this connection to the real, though the outcome of such investment is liable to encompass a wide range of responses. Disasters, tragedies, and catastrophes are, after all, complex; they tend

to elide simple designations of cause and effect or blame and victimhood, and they generate multiple meanings based on the context in which they are experienced, viewed, or consumed. Like classical works of art, or the natural landscapes to which Benjamin compared those works of art, disasters demand contemplation; they cast a shadow over victims and media spectators alike, asking them to confront the lingering ghosts of collective trauma. That is their aura, and as this chapter has shown, it remains in the traces and fragments left behind in a disaster's wake, not only in the physical landscape, but also in the landscape of media and consumer culture that disasters generate today.

Chapter Two

The Consumption of Risk: September 11 and the Financial Crisis

Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the financial crisis that began in 2007 are in some respects very different sorts of disasters. The former took place in only a few hours, causing immediate death and destruction in lower Manhattan, Shanksville, PA, and at the Pentagon, resulting in the loss of 2,976 lives. The latter emerged and evolved over months and years as the gradual collapse of the subprime mortgage market wiped out several major financial firms, causing a steep decline in the stock market and sending ripple effects across the lives and livelihoods of many millions of Americans.

These two very different catastrophes were nonetheless treated similarly in American media and political culture. Both inspired extensive news coverage, political commentary, advertisements, and a variety of consumer goods and services. Both disasters were described by politicians, financial or military experts, and journalists as worst-case scenarios that were largely unforeseeable, even though warning signs and historical precedents existed for both cases. And both served as the inspiration for expansive and expensive new government programs designed to minimize the damage from these disasters and protect against the recurrence of similar risks. The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act, commonly known as the Patriot Act, was signed into law less than

two months after the September 11 attacks, greatly expanding the powers of law enforcement agencies to eavesdrop on personal communications and seize bank accounts, among other provisions, in the hopes of preventing future terrorist attacks. Similarly, on October 3, 2008, less than a month after Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP) became law, thereby authorizing the Treasury Department to purchase up to $700 billion in toxic mortgage assets from the nation's failing financial firms or to directly inject capital into those companies in order to stabilize the national and global economies.

Despite their similarities, the public reaction to these two disaster-inspired government programs was very different. The Patriot Act was quickly signed into law with almost unanimous support from lawmakers, and opinion polls showed widespread public support for the Patriot Act initially, and even two and three years after its passage (Moore, 2003; Saad, 2004). The Troubled Asset Relief Program, on the other hand, faced heavy opposition from many politicians and their constituents, resulting in its initial rejection in the US House of Representatives (Hulse and Herszenhorn, 2008). A few days later the TARP was passed in the Senate and then in the House in the form of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, thanks to increased public relations efforts by government spokespersons and financial industry experts, and presumably some behind-the-scenes arm-twisting of hesitant elected officials. Nevertheless, in this instance the public reacted much less trustingly to the government's proposed solution than it had in the days after September 11.

Such a discrepancy between the American public's reactions to the government's proposed solutions to these two massive catastrophes makes them important test cases for sociological theories of risk. These theories, growing out of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992), as well as the work of Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), claim that modernity has moved past its

classical stage devoted to defeating scarcity and creating wealth, and into a new, reflexive stage in which modernity is concerned with its own byproducts and unintended consequences. The risks that modern science produces have themselves become the objects of much modern scientific effort, and the management of such potential hazards has emerged as a critical part of contemporary social life for technical experts and governmental authorities, as well as the general public. Giddens explained, "Many people, as it were, make a 'bargain with modernity' in terms of the trust they vest in symbolic tokens and expert systems. The nature of the bargain is governed by specific admixtures of deference and skepticism, comfort and fear" (Giddens, 1990, p. 90). Individuals in a risk society thus weigh competing expert opinions on risks and assume at least partial responsibility for their own assessments of the variety of threats facing them. They then make decisions about where to live, what to eat, where to travel, and how else to protect themselves based on their trust in these assessments.

Although risk society theorists initially focused this framework on the threat of toxic pollutants and environmental degradation, it has been applied to terrorism and financial crises as well. In an essay written shortly after September 11, Beck added terrorism to the list of global risks with which citizens of the modern Western must now contend (Beck, 2002), and the widely dispersed effects of high finance decision-making similarly confirmed for Giddens (1990) the notion that modernity produced feedback or boomerang effects. For instance, the uncertainties surrounding the likelihood of terrorist attacks have spawned new formulas, technologies, and practices of risk assessment and control, but these have often inspired new fears and increased insecurities related to terrorism (Aradau and van Munster, 2007). Just as with techno-scientific and environmental risks, the threats and uncertainties surrounding terrorism and financial crises persist even in the wake of policies and technologies designed to minimize them. As one

discussion of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 concluded, "If the financial realm—dominated by the confident certainties of mathematics and economics—is in fact inherently ambiguous, then what spaces of human existence are free from ambiguity?" (Best, 2008, p. 370).

The recognition of such persistent risks and ambiguities—either despite or because of the efforts of scientists, security experts, and government agencies—has led some to conclude that the power of authorities to influence public perceptions of risks and threats is in decline. Various high-profile examples of scientific mistakes and cover-ups have fueled public skepticism about scientific research in general and about the risk claims of its representatives in business and government. In this way, failures of scientific technology and examples of governmental or corporate negligence, like the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl and the Bhopal chemical disaster, have helped foster a climate of public mistrust concerning subsequent scientific developments such as genetically modified foods and other biotechnologies (see Grove-White, 1996; Almas, 1999; Brown and Michael, 2002). Each time that authorities are found to have concealed dangers, or worse yet, when dangers materialize that were unforeseen by such authorities, it calls into question "the very idea of expertise" (Giddens, 1990, p. 131).

However, the "crisis of legitimacy" (Harbermas, 1975) that has supposedly become part of modern society was not reflected in the American public's response to claims made by authorities regarding terrorism in the wake of September 11. Instead, the public largely supported government authorities and security experts after September 11, as those entities quickly assigned responsibility for the attacks and almost immediately made the case for foreign military interventions and greater domestic policing and surveillance powers. The reasons why the public largely trusted the government after 9/11, but did not do so during the financial crisis, are complex and numerous. This chapter focuses on the role of the news and entertainment

media, as well as certain aspects of consumer culture, in public perceptions of these two disasters and the risk prevention policies they inspired. Investigating how these disasters were experienced by audiences or consumers, and how authorities attempted to frame these events, reveals much about the role of the media in establishing trust in government during crisis conditions.

This chapter argues that the authentic quality of certain kinds of disasters, especially as they are represented in mass media and popular culture today, helps explain why and when the public places its trust in official risk assessments. As the present work demonstrates, government officials, media pundits, and financial or security experts used many similar rhetorical techniques to define the risks of both terrorism and the financial crisis on television news broadcasts, and to support or defend various risk-related government decisions in the wake of these disasters. Despite these similarities, only one of these disasters inspired public consensus in support of official risk-prevention strategies. The key difference concerning the mass-mediation and mass-consumption of these disasters was the form of real-time spectatorship that so many Americans experienced on September 11. The undeniably authentic nature of the images, the panicked tone of the news anchors, the sense that the entire nation might be under attack, and the real loss of life that those images implied—these had no analogue in financial crisis coverage, despite the sometimes panicked state of commentators on the news broadcasts surrounding that crisis. This chapter thus suggests that the particular sense of authenticity surrounding the mediation of September 11 was, in a sense, transferred to the risk assessments and policy-making efforts that followed.

Such an assertion necessitates a rethinking of the risk society thesis. Recent scholars have already recognized that the role of mass media and consumer culture in the construction of risk is greater and more complex than the risk society thesis initially allowed (Anderson, 2006), and this

fact has several implications for public opinion concerning government interventions to alleviate future threats. To begin with, it means that authenticity has become a primary criterion for the assessment of risk communications, in terms of the perceived authenticity of a disaster's representation in popular culture, the authenticity of those public figures who discuss the disaster, and the likelihood that the disaster or a similar one in the future poses a genuine threat to audience members. Moreover, the power of disasters, as markers of such authenticity, to steer public opinion in particular ways hints at a reversal of the models by which publics become sensitized to risks. Today's opinion makers appear largely able to avoid public skepticism over their risk claims if the public is first alerted to a threat through its realization as a mass-mediated disaster. Compared to efforts to convince doubtful publics of the safety of new biotechnologies, or educate them on the eventual effects of global warming, for instance, authorities confront more trusting and receptive public opinion when an actual disaster or crisis brings instantaneous, widespread attention to a threat like terrorism. In this sense, the immediate and discrete nature of the September 11 attacks, as opposed to the lengthy and evolving procession of events in the financial crisis, likely aided government efforts to shape public opinion about that crisis. Though it at first appears counterintuitive that authorities would gain public trust because a disaster has struck, this fact speaks to the authenticity that disasters carry with them, as well as the ability of those in power to capitalize on that authenticity. In order to trust the risk management strategies of authorities, it appears the public must first engage in the mass consumption of catastrophe.

Media Construction of September 11: A Review

Scholars from many different disciplines have analyzed the content of media coverage of the September 11 attacks. Besides the obvious enormity of September 11 as a historical event, the fact that America's normally fragmented, contentious landscape of politics and opinion

became uncommonly unified after the attacks has warranted further study. Opinion polls have shown that public trust in government "to do what is right" increased dramatically immediately after September 11, though those levels of trust have plummeted in the intervening years (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press [Pew], 2010). Similarly, President Bush's immediate post-9/11 approval rating of 90% was the highest in the history of the Gallup poll (Moore, 2001), though it too dropped in the following years. Content analyses of the media's September 11 coverage have shed light on the ways that mass media reflected and presumably helped shape this belief in government.

The speed required to deliver breaking news in its earliest minutes and hours can cause lapses in normal journalistic practice (Reynolds and Barnett, 2003). As such, few outside experts were featured in the earliest news coverage of September 11, which by necessity relied mainly on the networks' own anchors and correspondents. As time passed and news agencies were able to reestablish routines, government officials became the most frequent type of post-9/11 guest. Though such over-reliance on government sources occurred in both newspapers and televised news programs, the trend was more pronounced in TV coverage (Li and Izard, 2003). One study of network TV news programs found that 67% of on-camera sources in the lead-up to the Iraq war were current or former officials, while few independent and grassroots perspectives were given airtime (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, 2003). Although this may also be a result of the demands of breaking news coverage, since government sources are likely to be more readily available in the beginning stages of a crisis than those with opposing or minority viewpoints, it is nonetheless an important feature of such coverage. Given that Americans watched an average of eight hours of television news coverage on September 11 (Heller, 2005) and that 81 % of Americans reported being "constantly tuned in" to television and radio news reports in the week

that followed (Pew, 2001, September 19), this bias in favor of government sources may help explain the high levels of support for the government's early responses to September 11.

In the aftermath of 9/11, political speeches and newspaper coverage of the disaster constructed "the American people" in ways that emphasized both the communal responsibilities and emotional resilience of a supposedly unified electorate (Hart, Jarvis, and Lim, 2002). One content analysis of President Bush's pre- and post-9/11 speeches found a similar shift in rhetoric towards more collective, patriotic, and faith-based themes (Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl, 2004). Yet even when political language and media perspectives are fairly unified, the public's concerns may differ from those suggested by elites. Despite a generally high level of concern expressed in both public opinion surveys and news reports over the possibility of future terrorist attacks and the effects of 9/11 on the U.S. economy, Americans were not worried about some other consequences of 9/11 that received extensive news coverage, and they did worry about consequences which received less coverage: Craft and Wanta (2004) found that Americans were not very concerned about the length of American involvement in the Afghan war or its effects on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite the high level of press coverage both topics received, but they worried instead about less-covered topics like the threat of a biological attack. The authors of that paper suggest that "personal consequences may outweigh extensive media coverage when it comes to identifying concerns" (Craft and Wanta, 2004, p. 461). Such findings confirm, at least to an extent, the media-reception models of scholars like Hall (1980) that emphasize audiences' ability to 'decode' messages in ways that media producers had not intended. They also suggest that, in the aftermath of September 11, immediate fear for the well-being of oneself and one's family trumped more abstract concerns about geopolitical entanglements. Many Americans gauged the risk of terrorism as an acute and persistent threat to themselves and

everyone in the United States. Almost two years after 9/11, one survey reported that 74% of Americans believed that occasional acts of terrorism would be part of life in the future, and 58% worried that there would "soon be another terrorist attack in the U.S." (Pew, 2003, September 4).

Although post-9/11 public opinion may have been a mixture of government agenda-setting and the public's more endogenous concerns, evidence of a broad consensus about the threat of terrorism and America's response to that threat does exist. A month and a half after the United States began its military operations in Afghanistan, 85% of Americans supported the war (Pew, 2001, December 6), and almost three-quarter of Americans offered similar support for the subsequent invasion of Iraq, although that percentage declined as American casualties mounted (Pew, 2003, March 25). This support for war is significant beyond a simple "rally around the flag" effect, as it attests to the popularity of the belief that the 9/11 attacks constituted an act of war which required military action, not a crime that required prosecution. One study found that nightly television news programs in the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan were indeed almost twice as likely to employ this war framework as opposed to a crime or law-enforcement frame (Edy and Meirick, 2007). Another study found that, although both American and Canadian news magazines frequently adopted "revenge" or "retaliation" frames around the war on terror, the American publications were more likely to justify such actions by demonizing those on the receiving end as "evil" and showing more emotionally gripping photographs (Deveau and Fouts, 2005). Of course, a revenge frame may have been particularly salient for the 20% of Americans who reported that they or their friends or relatives knew someone who was missing, hurt, or killed in the 9/11 attacks (Pew, 2001, September 19), but it nevertheless bears repeating that the wide public support for war as a response to 9/11 involved the exclusion or negation of other competing interpretations of the attacks.

Media commentary also perpetuated the war framework through historical comparisons between the September 11 attacks and Pearl Harbor. One study found that Pearl Harbor was the most common analogy used in the September 11 coverage of both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (Winfield et al., 2002). By making repeated reference to the events that began American involvement in what is still thought of as "the good war" some 60 years later, supporters of American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq fostered the idea that these new conflicts were as morally justifiable as American participation in World War II had been (Brands, 2008). In this same way, political leaders in the United States and Great Britain frequently sought to create an association between themselves and the steadfast, righteous political leaders of that era such as Roosevelt and Churchill (Toye, 2008; Brands, 2008). All this despite the fact that the live, real-time viewing experience of September 11 differed greatly from the mass-mediation of Pearl Harbor, when it took nine days for the first images of the attacks to be printed in newspapers, and almost 11 months before the public was shown newsreel footage of the attacks (Mills, 2009).

The war on terror, particularly its manifestation in Iraq, was not only justified by emotionally charged images, Manichean frameworks of good versus evil, and historical associations with favorably viewed conflicts of the past. It was also based on a number of Bush Administration claims that were dubious from the outset and that were subsequently proven false. Claims regarding Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and Saddam Hussein's collaboration with al Qaeda formed the backbone of the administration's rationale for invading Iraq, despite a scarcity of evidence beforehand and the failure of the American occupation of Iraq to find such evidence. The administration's claims on these matters, and its additional claim that world public opinion favored America's invasion of Iraq, were repeated by

the press even after they had been debunked. As such, many Americans continued to harbor these misperceptions as the war dragged on and the evidence of WMD or al Qaeda collaboration failed to materialize. Indeed, the belief in any of these misperceptions was the strongest indicator of support for the Iraq war in one study of public opinion, stronger even than the intention to vote for President Bush in the 2004 election (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis, 2003-04). Fox News viewers were most likely to harbor such misperceptions, while NPR and PBS audiences were least likely (Kull et. al, 2003-04, p. 582-583). These misperceptions speak to a lack of adversarial journalism in mainstream news sources; while credible, skeptical assessments of the administration's pre-war claims abounded, these were at the very least underreported by the major newspapers and TV news networks who found themselves patriotically falling in line behind President Bush in the weeks and months after September 11. As Dan Rather put it during his September 17, 2001 appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*: "George Bush is the President, he makes the decisions, and you know, as just one American wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where."

In addition to these misperceptions, racial and ethnic stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims figured into media coverage of the 9/11 attacks, though perhaps to a lesser degree than one might have anticipated. Certainly, commentary and programming from extreme right-wing and religious sources like Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club* framed Islam in general as a threat to America and Christianity (Gormly, 2004), but many mainstream politicians, pundits, and journalists made sure to avoid this sort of characterization of the war on terror. In fact, studies have shown that Muslims and Arab-Americans spoke more frequently and from more favorable positions in American newspapers and TV news programs immediately after 9/11 than they had previously (Domke, Garland, Billeaudeaux, and Hutcheson, 2003; Nacos and Torres-Reyna,

2003). Another study found that television news programs framed Islam in more neutral terms than did other media sources, like the online message board of one cable news network, where user-generated messages contained many more negative nouns and nominalizations following the adjective 'Islamic' (Martin and Phelan, 2002). Nonetheless, many Muslim American community leaders have expressed frustration with the news media's post-9/11 portrayal of Muslims (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009). Although these findings complicate the idea that negative racial and religious stereotypes around terrorism were the result of simple top-down indoctrination by media and political elites, Martin and Phelan caution that "any official deployment of an 'us and them' rhetoric generates dangerous implicatures, which, though they aim for a different target, will invariably be used by many to defame a whole cultural entity or entities" (2002, p. 268). Some Americans did indeed respond to these defamatory implications: in the week following September 11 alone, there were 645 incidents of violent backlash against Americans of South Asian or Middle East descent reported in U.S. media outlets, including three deaths (South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow, 2001).

September 11 and Consumer Culture

In addition to the national news media, American consumer culture shaped, and was shaped by, general public support of post-9/11 government policies. In the days immediately following September 11, Americans were asked mainly to show their patriotism and resiliency by continuing to spend money. As Vice President Cheney put it, Americans had to "stick their thumb in the eye of the terrorists and… not let what happened here in any way throw off their normal level of economic activity" (quoted in Reich, 2001, p. B1). Mayor Rudolph Guiliani and President Bush similarly encouraged Americans to travel and take vacations as a show of patriotism (Sturken, 2007). This stands, of course, in stark contrast to the extensive rationing and

saving encouraged of American consumers during World War II (Reich, 2001; see also Cohen, 2003).

What followed was an explosion of 9/11-themed or inspired commodities. Products like Fire Department, City of New York (FDNY) teddy bears or World Trade Center (WTC) snow globes were consumed to express sympathy for victims of the attacks (Sturken, 2007). T-shirts with various jingoistic slogans such as "It's Personal Now" and fake "terrorist hunting permit" stickers were consumed to express anger and aggression towards those who caused the attacks (Scanlon, 2005). Tourists descended on the World Trade Center site, buying souvenirs there that they believed were imbued with the "unique feeling of world-historical manna that penetrates Ground Zero" (Trimarco and Hurley Depret, 2005, p. 28). Photographer Brian Loube produced commemorative 3-D stereoscopic photographs of the burning towers as viewed from his Tribeca neighborhood. And the French filmmakers Jules and Gedeon Naudet captured the experience of firemen responding to the WTC fires in footage that became the documentary *9/11* (2002), which CBS aired commercial-free on March 10, 2002, and several times thereafter.

More than simply directing our sympathy, iconic images like those of the attacks have the potential to reproduce ideology, shape collective memory, model citizenship, and provide resources for communicative action (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). September 11 iconography combined deep expressions of grief with a sense of the world as newly and perhaps permanently dangerous, and these sentiments resonated with so many Americans precisely because they had experienced these events live, in real-time, on television. As Mary Ann Doane put it, "television deals not with the weight of the dead past but with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present. And the ultimate drama of the instantaneous—catastrophe—constitutes the very limit of its discourse" (Doane, 1990, p. 222).

The public's mixture of sympathy, grief, fear, and anger found expression in the general sense of patriotism that pervaded American consumer culture after 9/11, created by small souvenir vendors and large corporate advertisers alike, and echoed in patriotic decals and flags displayed on cars and homes and highway overpasses across the country. The largest of all corporations, Wal Mart, sold 116,000 American flags on September 11 alone, and quickly ran out of the half a million flags it had in stock nationally (Scanlon, 2005). Advertisements from companies like General Motors used post-9/11 patriotism in their slogan "Keep America Rolling," a simultaneous reference to the words of the passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 who fought back against their hijackers and a plea for consumers to continue buying American cars and trucks. Other companies rushed to produce simple, solemn newspaper ads expressing their condolences and sharing in the grief of Americans while still reaffirming those firms' presence in the marketplace. These products and advertisements conveyed a sense of national unity normally absent in the increasingly fragmented worlds of American politics and popular culture.

In the end, such national unity and belonging emerged from a shared trauma and collective fears about the risk of future attacks. Seventy-one percent of Americans reported feeling depressed by the terrorist attacks in one post-9/11 survey, and 63% agreed that they "can't stop watching news about the terrorist attacks" (Pew, 2001, September 19; per contra on the issue of depression, see Huddy, Feldman, Lahav, and Taber, 2003). A month later only 42% of respondents still felt depressed, but elevated levels of news consumption remained constant (Pew, 2001, October 4). Some argue that such responses suggest that American citizens experienced a kind of trauma on September 11 simply by watching the events unfold on television; indeed, trauma is often experienced as "having seen too much" (Young, 2007, p. 33).

Kaplan (2005) has likened this kind of "vicarious trauma" to the strong emotional reactions of psychotherapists whose patients relay to them particularly disturbing life stories. Hart et al. (2002) found that post-9/11 political speeches "rehearse the classic therapeutic encounter, where the client articulates his or her (1) felt anxieties and (2) inner strengths so that (3) self-authorized healing can result" (p. 426). In addition to expressing sympathy or anger at distant others, then, the consumption of September 11-related goods and services seems to have contained an element of self-help, attesting to the notion that Americans felt themselves attacked on 9/11 even if they and their loved ones were nowhere near New York or Washington, DC.

Mass consumption simultaneously salves these traumas and reinforces or re-inscribes them. Huddy et. al suggest that "fear fragments and isolates society into anxious groups of individuals only concerned with their own personal survival" (2003, p. 255); critics have leveled very similar charges about the atomizing influence of mass consumption for decades. The widespread "consumerism of security" (Sturken, 2007, p. 41) that emerged in response to September 11 made this connection between fear and consumption explicit. With terrorism portrayed as an ever-present and unpredictable risk, "preparedness" or "readiness" became prominent themes in government communications and the marketplace. American citizen-consumers were urged to become an interactive part of the defense against future terrorist attacks through programs like the Terrorist Information Prevention System (TIPS), in which citizens could report suspicious activities that they'd witnessed, and ready.gov, a website with instructions for parents and children on how to be prepared for a terrorist attack (Andrejevic, 2006). These efforts quickly coalesced around the family home; concern for the safety of one's family members tends to make up a larger component of fear of crime than regard for one's own safety (see Warr and Ellison, 2000), and the home is the site where such concern can be allayed

through consumption of everything from home security systems to bigger, supposedly safer cars like the Hummer, which saw its sales peak in the period between 2001 and 2004 (Sturken, 2007). This effort to secure domestic life against looming and nebulous threats paralleled the creation of government agencies like the Department of Homeland Security: "The militarization of the home is thus not only a means through which public fear of terrorism is mediated but is also a process through which the domestic household is articulated into the policies of the U.S. government" (Sturken, 2007, p. 41). These kinds of appeals to the readiness of individual consumers and family units in the protection of the home and homeland have appeared in the form of banal requests to stock up on duct tape, advice guides touting the purchase of firearms (Lockard, 2005), and outlandish products like executive parachutes for those who work at the top levels of skyscrapers (Andrejevic, 2006).

However, the public response to September 11 was more than simply a matter of manipulation by government authorities, military experts, and political elites, although these entities certainly capitalized on feelings of national unity, sympathy, and vulnerability generated from the traumatic form of spectatorship that developed during and after the attacks. Though public opinion ultimately and overwhelmingly fell in line behind Bush administration policies which may have been opposed under less trying circumstances, resistance to mainstream narratives about September 11 does deserve mention. For instance, in February of 2003, a month before the United States invaded Iraq, 58% of Americans believed that the United States did not have enough international support to go to war, and 57% believed that the country should get a second United Nations resolution before any military engagement (Pew, 2003, February 20). That same month, millions of Americans in over 150 U.S. cities protested the possible invasion (Chan, 2003). Polls and protests like these that opposed the Bush Administration's eventual

decision to invade have tended to be lost in memories of post-9/11 nationalism, but they nonetheless remind us that public opinion is never as singular or cohesive as the phrase itself implies. The overall support for war may have been a result of a scarcity of information for consumers of mainstream news media; as suggested before, the lack of adversarial journalism in the wake of 9/11 has been well documented by websites like Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (see, for example, Randall 2004). These journalistic flaws may also help explain the growing number of Americans who believe in some form of September 11-related conspiracy theory (see Grossman, 2006). In either case, the narratives of mainstream journalism appear to have greatly shaped the debate around the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. In the build-up to the Iraq war, a majority of Americans believed that evidence of WMDs had been found in Iraq by weapons inspectors, and that Saddam Hussein had a hand in the 9/11 attacks, and a large majority of those who held such beliefs supported the war (Pew, 2003, February 20). Such support seems reasonable given the lack of investigation into these claims by mainstream journalists, and the misperceptions to which that journalism gave birth. Nonetheless, the overall public trust in government immediately after September 11 remains remarkable, despite pockets of criticism and resistance.

Constructing a New Crisis: The Financial Crisis in American TV News

The idea that elites in government and industry can capitalize on crises to further their own goals is, of course, not a new one. Politicians have long used emergencies or catastrophes to impose a variety of deprivations upon citizens, and social theorists from Marx to Schumpeter have recognized that crises operate in modern life as not only an obstacle to progress but also an instrument of it. Rozario (2007) believes that this peculiar relationship between modernity and crisis helps explain the growing public appetite for disaster in modern mass media and popular

culture. Naomi Klein (2007) has argued that, rather than simply acquiescing to deprivation, citizens of neoliberal governments across the globe have been shocked into dazed submission to a variety of post-disaster privatization schemes. But the previous discussion of September 11 showed that, far from being uniformly shocked into consensus, public reactions to the attacks themselves and the government's response to those attacks varied tremendously, from vehement opposition to vigorous mass consumption. Ultimately, the fear of a new, perpetual terrorist threat did dovetail with public expressions of mourning to produce a patriotic popular culture that largely supported government actions. As such, it is worth exploring whether the mass-mediated consumption of disaster operated in a similar fashion during another American crisis that unfolded nine years after September 11.

To that end, I performed a content analysis of television news coverage concerning the financial crisis as it developed in 2008. For my sample I selected the three most widely watched American TV news programs: *CBS Evening News*, *ABC World News*, and *NBC Nightly News;* as well as three of the highest rated cable news shows: CNN's *Larry King Live*, *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, and *The Situation Room*.[1] Rather than making an exhaustive survey of all news coverage on this subject, my aim was to get a good cross-section of widely watched news programs in order to see how notions of crisis and risk have been constructed in this recent financial disaster. Although many Americans read newspapers rather than watch television news, and an increasing amount of Americans receive their news from websites, television is still the number one source for news in this country (Gammeltoft, 2009), and its rhetorical conceits and

[1] Fox News does not provide transcripts for its programming, even though programs like its *O'Reilly Factor* are more widely watched than any on CNN, so no Fox shows were included in my sample. Fox has been shown to be more conservative than other cable networks (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2006), so I also excluded news programs from the presumably more liberal cable network MSNBC in order to balance the ideological effects of Fox's omission.

semiotic strategies can rightfully be expected to inform all aspects of the discourse around any particular crisis.

I analyzed transcripts of these six programs on four important dates in the unfolding of the financial crisis.[2] Those dates were March 17, 2008, the day after Bear Stearns agreed to be purchased by JP Morgan for $2 a share; September 15, 2008, the day after Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy; September 19, 2008, the day that the Treasury Department proposed its Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP); and October 3, 2008, the day after President Bush signed into law the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, which authorized the government to purchase $700 billion in troubled assets and provide other aid to distressed financial institutions.[3]

One frequent criticism of September 11 television news coverage was the over-reliance on government sources. To find out if this was true of the financial crisis coverage as well, I placed all the guests on these programs into four categories: government sources, members of the financial industry, independent analysts or members of other media organizations, and members of the general public. As it turned out, these programs also relied on government sources more than any other category of guest. Government sources commented 99 times in this sample of 24 news programs, which is more than double the next largest cross-section of guests or commentators—the independent analysts and members of the press from other networks or news organizations, who appeared 46 times. Members of the general public, though these were often laid-off workers from the financial industry, were the next most frequent group on these programs, with 37 appearances. The least frequently appearing group were those currently in the

[2] Transcripts were acquired from Lexis Nexis and the Burrelles Luce transcription service.
[3] Two of these dates had to be shifted slightly for *Larry King Live*, since many of his shows dealt with a single, predetermined issue and thus did not cover the developments in the financial crisis until a day or two after they happened. Also, because the nightly network news programs are only a half-hour long, whereas CNN's are divided into two or three hour-long segments, I only selected the first hour of each CNN program for my sample.

financial industry, such as CEOs, large investors, and financial advisors; this group appeared only 26 times, an average of just over once per show. While government officials frequently promoted the necessity of government intervention in order to save the financial industry from the threat of further collapse, few industry spokespeople came on these shows to support the tax-payer funded largesse they were in line to receive.

Another point often made about news coverage of the 9/11 attacks was how frequently those attacks were compared to Pearl Harbor and World War II. In a similar fashion, coverage of the financial crisis overwhelmingly made reference to the Great Depression. The Depression was three times more likely than any other historical event to be used as a point of comparison, appearing an average of once per program. Rather than the attacks of 9/11, which had more recently caused economic hardships and sent stocks tumbling, or the 1980s savings and loan scandals, which had resulted in a government bailout but also criminal prosecutions of those responsible, the Great Depression provided a model of benign and effective government economic intervention that Americans today view favorably. This Great Depression comparison neglects the fact that the Keynesian solutions of the New Deal are a far cry from the neo-liberal approach to the current bailout, in which comparatively few new government jobs have been created and few conditions have been imposed on the financial institutions receiving the bulk of government assistance. The Great Depression/New Deal comparison had the compound effect of calling forth a fear-inducing worst-case scenario, and matching it with a best-case scenario of benevolent government regulation.

Given the preference for this model of government intervention, it is not surprising that the news shows in this sample brought up the possibility of criminal investigations or prosecutions very infrequently: it occurred only five times in the entire sample, and almost all of

them came from one particular commentator who appeared on two different shows. This is despite the fact that several investigations into possible criminal wrongdoing and fraud were ongoing at the time of many of these broadcasts, though the Bernie Madoff scandal had yet to emerge. Perhaps due to the paucity of other metaphors with which to describe crises, these news programs more frequently used language taken from natural disasters, such as "aftershocks," or industrial disasters, like "fallout," than from anything related to crime and the justice system. Such language choices resulted in a general mood of fear and apprehension without assigning culpability; while some of the programs did ask guests to assign blame, no consensus about who was responsible for the crisis ever seemed to emerge, and the financial crisis was discussed as a moral failing of Americans of all socio-economic stripes as much as a result of failed policies or ideologies.

Criticism of the financial industry and the government's response to that industry's imminent collapse did exist on these programs, but such populism was overwhelmed by a general sense of fear. Although some commentators urged Americans, especially those with money in the stock market, not to panic, the over-represented government sources often used fear-mongering to convince the public that government bailouts of Wall Street institutions were necessary. An appearance by Senator Chris Dodd on the September 19 edition of *The Situation Room* was particularly noteworthy in this respect. Asked to describe an economic briefing that he and other political leaders received from Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Dodd said:

> Well, I'm going to be reluctant to repeat exactly the words, not because I can't remember them, but, because, if you were to repeat them exactly, I'm fearful it might cause even more concern. I can't begin to tell you. I have been here for 28 years, Wolf [Blitzer, the program's host], been in a lot of very critical meetings involving a lot of important events over the last quarter-of-a-century. I can't recall another occasion when I was in a room where statements were made about the

> conditions of not only our economy, but the global economy, that caused every member in that room, the leadership of the House, the Senate, Republicans, Democrats, leaders of committees, that, when Chairman Bernanke finished his appraisal, a brief appraisal, along with Hank Paulson, there was dead silence in the room for maybe five to ten seconds. The oxygen went out of the room. People were stunned by what they heard.

When Blitzer asked Dodd if he thought the American people had a right to know what he and his fellow members of Congress were told about the consequences of doing nothing, Dodd responded "Well, again, I'm telling you how dire it was without, without getting into specific wording."

Dodd's response was perhaps the best example of a new way of explaining risk that appeared frequently in coverage of the financial crisis as well as in the aftermath of September 11. In both cases, although authorities asked the public for their trust, they also sought to reaffirm the frightening possibilities of the risk of future terrorism or further financial collapse. Traditionally, official communications about risk have sought to reassure publics that the risks in question are manageable, and that authorities are in control. Essentially, the message of this sort of risk communication has been "trust us and be reassured." But post-9/11 risk communication has evinced a shift in rhetoric that emphasizes the continued dangers of certain risks, despite the limited threat that they pose to most citizens, using rhetoric that states, in effect, "trust us and be scared" (Handmer and James, 2007). In this form of risk communication, "the first priority of some governments is to spread fear and implement a range of expensive measures in the name of dealing with a threat that may make little difference locally" (Handmer and James, 2007, p. 129). Though the problems posed by the collapse of many large financial institutions would likely have transcended particular localities and affected many millions of Americans, the fact that unemployment and home foreclosures have risen tremendously in the wake of this crisis, consumer credit has dried up, and Americans have seen huge losses in their 401(k)s and other

retirement savings, suggests that the government's bailout has indeed made "little difference locally" for those Americans without a direct stake in the affected firms or the financial industry. In any case, Dodd's insistence on the dire consequences of inaction coupled with his reluctance to actually explain these consequences suggests that the motivations for his appearance were more about spreading apprehension than helping to educate the audience.

Of course, the details of the financial crisis and the proposed government remedies were complicated, and, as such there appeared to be a reluctance or inability to fully explain these details on the part of many TV news journalists and their on-screen sources. General references to "risky investments" or "speculation" were more common than longer explanations of what those terms might mean in these particular cases. Occasionally, the blame was placed on things like "derivatives, complex financial instruments that got these companies into trouble" (Andy Serwer, quoted on *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, 2008, September 15), but this was about as complex as the explanations got. As during September 11, it appears that these mainstream media sources offered little choice in terms of the kinds and depth of information to consume. For more in-depth, critical discussion of the financial crisis, consumers had to look elsewhere, perhaps in periodicals like *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Economist* that specialize in these issues, or perhaps on websites with similar focuses like *Bloomberg.com*, or economics blogs like *Naked Capitalism* or *Zero Hedge*. Public intellectuals like Paul Krugman and Robert Reich also used blogs connected to *The New York Times* and *Salon.com*, respectively, to put forth critical and skeptical commentary on the financial crisis and the proposed bailout, but these sorts of perspectives were much less prevalent on mainstream television news programs.

While officials, experts, and pundits often used their appearances on these programs to establish a general sense that inaction, or even simply delayed action, held enormously fearful

consequences for the entire American economy, a particular rhetorical framework appeared frequently on all of these programs to cement the idea that trouble in the financial industry would result in trouble for all Americans. Even when they expressed skepticism about the government's bailout plan, television news anchors, reporters, analysts, and government officials contributed to the assumption that the bailout was a fair use of tax payer money every time they adopted a rhetorical symmetry between "Wall Street" and "Main Street." Phrases like "Wall Street's woes are weighing heavily on the minds of Main Street" (Ben Tracy, *CBS Evening News*, September 19, 2008), "President Bush signs historic legislation into law to bail out Wall Street and Main Street" (Wolf Blitzer, *The Situation Room*, October 3, 2008), and "What you care about on Main Street is that this crunch on Wall Street doesn't spill over to Main Street…" (Diane Swonk, *ABC World News*, March 17, 2008) divided the American economy into two separate sectors with equal linguistic weight; the two phrases sound almost the same, have the same number of syllables, and were usually counterbalanced by one another within a sentence. But this framework masked the fact that "Wall Street" represented a tiny fraction of the American workforce, whereas "Main Street" in this expression essentially refers to everyone else in America. This created a sense of equivalence between these two economic interests or demographics that may not have existed otherwise, given the very different size, income, and locations of these two groups.

As Erving Goffman explained in his landmark study of framing, "what is sovereign is relationship, not substance" (1974, p. 560-561). Repeating this seemingly innocuous phrase again and again established the equivalent relationship between Wall Street and Main Street, regardless of the substantive merits of such equivalence. This framework appeared 30 times in the 24 shows of the sample, and the frequency increased over time as the government's proposed

bailout plan became larger. It was usually not connected to specific concerns that members of "Main Street" might have, but when that did happen, a possible freeze on consumer credit or a decline in investments like 401(k) plans were the most commonly expressed fears. But despite the widely quoted fact that almost 50% of Americans own some stock, and the obviously large implications for the entire economy of a declining stock market, this equivalence between the concerns of Wall Street and Main Street seems dubious. According to the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 6,578,817 Americans work in "finance and insurance." While that's certainly a generous operationalization of the term "Wall Street," it still makes up only 4% of the American work force, and 2% of the American population as a whole, which is presumably the population represented by the phrase "Main Street."

Furthermore, this phrase's increase in frequency coincided with the government's growing need to promote an increasingly unpopular bailout plan; in its initial stages, many were unconvinced that infusing hundreds of billions of dollars into failing financial institutions was also going to fix larger economic issues affecting the rest of the country and the world. In July of 2008, 68% of Americans believed that government still had the power to fix a globalized economy, but by October of that year that number was down to 56% (Pew, 2008, October 15). Similarly, as politicians and presidential candidates debated the bailout plan, public support wavered; between September 22 and 29 of 2008, the percentage of Americans who felt that the government's plan was "the right thing to do" declined from 57 to 45% (Pew, 2008, September 30). The first version of bailout legislation failed to secure enough votes, thanks in large part to wary constituents pressuring their representatives to vote against it. Thus, the increasing use of the rhetorical connection between Wall Street and Main Street suggests a somewhat concerted effort to counteract growing public skepticism towards government bailouts for high finance.

One CNN correspondent actually appeared to unwittingly acknowledge that the phrase's increasing frequency on her network was the result of government spin efforts: on the October 3 edition of *The Situation Room*, Congressional correspondent Jessica Yellin said "some of the leaders are saying the biggest mistake they ever made with this bill was saying that it's a bailout for Wall Street. They say this is about Main Street, and they needed to communicate that message all along. That's what they failed to do effectively." While Yellin simply intended to relay insider information about political strategy, she also unwittingly implicated her own network, who had run with the Main Street/Wall Street language more frequently than the others.

This small sample of financial crisis news coverage indicates that government officials had more access to these news programs and were able, to some degree, to control the tone of the debate. While corporate and government claims about the causes and solutions to the financial crisis were occasionally scrutinized or criticized, the vague sense of dread about the consequences of inaction, coupled with a discursive insistence that the fate of average Americans and institutions of high finance were inextricably bound up in the Wall Street bailout, served the interests of bailout supporters. These rhetorical strategies were similar to those used by Bush officials during the lead up to the Iraq War, who employed a series of vague associations between Saddam Hussein and September 11 to make the case for Iraq's invasion without specifically claiming that Saddam was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. By suggesting that the risks of inaction were, once again, greater than the risks of waiting for more carefully considered pieces of legislation, government officials and their various media spokespeople helped fantastic fears of worst-case scenarios trump reasoned consideration of a broad range of expert opinion. Such strategies privilege an apprehensive public imagination over the kinds of rational risk assessment and communication usually discussed as part of modern risk society.

The new associations of equivalence between Wall Street and Main Street that emerged from this period seem to have been effective in influencing public opinion not only about who was likely to be affected by the financial crisis, but also about who was responsible for the crisis in the first place. An October 2008 survey found that 79% of Americans felt that "people taking on too much debt" were responsible for the financial crisis, while 72% also blamed "banks making risky loans." Other explanations such as weak government regulation and an overly complicated financial system found just 46 and 36% in agreement, respectively. Moreover, the economy overwhelmingly became the number one concern of Americans in this time period. From January 2008 to October 2008, the percentage of Americans rating the economy as the "most important national problem" rose from 34 to 75%, dwarfing problems such as Iraq (27 to 11%) and terrorism (from 3 to 2%); though as late as January 2006 those issues had still ranked ahead of economic concerns in Pew's surveys (Pew, 2008, October 15; Pew, 2006, January 11). The news transcripts in this sample reflected these economic concerns and helped amplify them, seemingly steering public opinion towards a collective view of individual and institutional blame in which the crisis was not simply a problem for Wall Street but for all of America. A general climate of fear was the norm in these broadcasts, but despite this general sense of panic for every sector of American life—or perhaps because of it—the fact that Wall Street was the sole recipient of most early efforts at fixing this widespread economic crisis tended to get lost in the shuffle.

The Financial Crisis in Consumer Culture

News programs were not the only segments of popular culture to adopt financial crisis or recession-related themes. Much as they had after September 11, many companies and advertisers shifted their marketing strategies to specifically address the harsh new economic climate.

Advertisements began to preface their sales pitches with phrases like "in times like these" or "during these uncertain times" to reassure consumers that the choice of a particular product was prudent even during a recession. Many of the companies hit hardest by the financial crisis continued to advertise, some in ways that only slightly acknowledged the crisis, others in ways that dealt with it head-on.

Banks and insurers have remained heavy advertisers during the crisis. Although they have not availed themselves of the government's TARP funds during this crisis, Allstate Insurance began a recent ad with soft music and black and white photographs of America during the Depression, while spokesman Denis Haysbert reminded viewers that the company started in 1931, "not exactly a great year to start a business." However, he reassured viewers that Allstate has noticed, through the 12 recessions since it opened its doors, that "after the fears subside, a funny thing happens: people start enjoying the small things in life" such as "time with loved ones." A much more central player in the current bailout, Bank of America, created an advertising campaign in 2008 entitled "Opportunities," built around the theme of saving. In one television spot, narrator Kiefer Sutherland asked the rhetorical question "Why is it so hard to save money? This is America, we save everything." Similarly, bailout recipient Citibank's recent ads urge consumers to "learn more about securing your money" or "spending smarter." Such spots ignored the irony of illiquid financial institutions saddled with toxic debt advising consumers on saving or spending wisely, in the hopes of reestablishing the simple rhetorical connection between themselves and secure, prudent financial decision-making.

General Motors Acceptance Corporation (GMAC), the financial services arm of General Motors, is another federal bailout recipient that adopted a new advertising strategy to coincide with the recession. GMAC applied in December of 2008 to the Federal Reserve to become a

bank holding company in order to receive billions of dollars in federal bailout money. After that, the company re-branded itself as Ally, and referred to itself in a series of humorous new ads featuring young children as "a new bank" that has adopted a series of consumer-friendly policies because "it's just the right thing to do." GMAC's predicament was brought on by the dire financial straits of General Motors, and that company also took a new advertising approach to try to counter the negative publicity surrounding its financial predicament. In ways that parallel their post-9/11 "Keep America Rolling" campaign, General Motors unveiled a new TV spot just days after declaring bankruptcy, in which the company assured audiences that "we're not witnessing the end of the American car; we're witnessing the rebirth of the American car" (quoted in Parekh and Halliday, 2009, para. 3). Of course, putting a glossy spin on the bankruptcy of one of America's largest employers can hardly mask the unfortunate irony that GM has not exactly "kept rolling" in the years since September 11. Auto companies have also devised new financing strategies to entice worried consumers to buy a car; Hyundai was first to offer its "Assurance" program as a way to protect new car buyers who subsequently lost their jobs, and other companies quickly followed suit. Ford's "Advantage" plan and GM's "Total Confidence," present similar protection options to car buyers worried about a possible job loss, though as at least one blogger has noted, "These plans present a major conundrum because no one should be in the business of selling a car to someone who probably won't be able to pay for it. The ideal target for this is someone who isn't actually likely to lose their job, but, out of fear, has avoided buying a new car they actually need" (Hardigree, 2009, para. 26). Rather than actually ameliorating the risk of taking out an automobile loan, these programs and their advertisements sought to reestablish trust between companies and consumers who were suddenly threatened by the shaky economy and were worried about spending money.

While banks and automakers may be expected to want to reassure fearful potential customers, companies in unrelated industries have flirted with callousness, camp, or absurdity in their recession- or crisis-themed ads. For instance, recent Denny's Restaurant ads state "It's one thing to bail out Wall Street. But who's gonna bail you out?" while Disney has promoted its Broadway musical *Mary Poppins* with testimonials from theater-goers that the show is "so well worth the money, and the uplifting of the spirit in these difficult times" (both quoted in Elliott, 2008). Domino's Pizza sought to explicitly evoke and capitalize upon populist anger with its "big taste bailout" promotion. One ad featured CEO David Brandon walking away from the Washington Capitol building saying "CEOs are practically lining up here to get a bailout. Well I'm not asking for one, I'm giving one!" In the next scene, flanked by a cadre of Domino's delivery people, he walked down Wall Street while railing against "fat cats," and then took a pizza box out of the hands of a man in a suit while saying "sorry Mr. Hedge Fund" and handing it to one of "you hardworking people on Main Street." These ads adopted a populist position that sought to capitalize on the anti-bailout sentiment largely absent from the mainstream television news coverage of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. Interestingly, as a point of comparison, no advertisements with similarly critical, anti-government narratives appeared in the aftermath of September 11.

Television shows have also begun to adapt to the financial crisis. New lifestyle programs such as The Food Network's *Sandra's Money-Saving Meals* and the budget- conscious makeover show *Closet Cases* from the Fine Living Network offer self-improvement tips tempered by a new sense of thrift (Patterson, 2009). Home and Garden Television (HGTV) has launched a show called *Income Property*, in which families remodel their homes so that they can take in tenants and avoid foreclosure, and another called *HGTV's $250,000 Challenge*, in which contestants

compete for a mortgage payout by updating their homes (Ibid). Scripted, fictional television programs are also beginning to reflect the current economic climate. The 2009 television pilot season saw the return of the "down-market sitcom:" at least two ABC pilots focused on the plight of laid-off bankers, and other networks were supposedly working on similar pilots during the crisis' aftermath (Gay, 2009).

Whether or not it is the result of these appeals to trust bailed-out banks or bankrupt automotive companies, or to spend frugally with fast-food promotions or savvy home renovations, American consumers have indeed begun to spend less and save more. The financial crisis has begun to buck a long-standing trend; since the mid-1990s, increasing levels of household debt have been the norm. Household saving rates even fell to negative 1 % in 2005 (Feldstein, 2006, p. 88). But consumer debt declined for four straight months from February to May 2009 (Pepitone, 2009), and personal savings in April 2009 reached 5.1%, a 14-year high (Tatom, 2009). The year 2008 was already the worst year for consumer spending since 1961 (Goldman, 2009, February 2), and news magazines have been flooded with anecdotes about newly budget conscious Americans: *Time Magazine* dubbed this, in its April 27, 2009 cover story, "The New Frugality."

Of course this new thriftiness may not be based on conscious decisions to avoid risky spending habits as much as a natural result of declining incomes and rising unemployment. Moreover, today's frugality is not, as it was during World War II, an expression of patriotism with beneficial results on the American economy as a whole (see Cohen, 2003). Rather, this crisis-inspired decline in spending represents what Keynes and others have called the "paradox of thrift:" when everyone saves money during a recession, consumer demand falls, the economy further contracts, and total savings in the population can actually shrink because of that

economic contraction. Such a paradox is especially potent in an American economy in which 70% of gross domestic product is based on consumption (Lahart, 2003). Thus, it remains unclear which carries more risk to American consumers and the American economy: increased spending or increased thrift.

Trust, Manipulation, and Authenticity in Crisis Conditions

So how do Americans decide to spend or save? Do they listen to experts or government officials? Simply put, these decisions require some measure of trust in the risk assessments of authorities. As Giddens put it, "the nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems, especially trust in expert systems" (1990, p. 83). With the complexity of modern science and governance, average citizens need to rely to a great extent on what experts tell them about what is safe and what is risky. But as the preceding examples have demonstrated, the voices of experts account for only a small part of the cacophonous pop culture soundscape that helps us determine the meaning of disasters and the potential of future risks. Even when such voices are generally in harmony with the rest of popular culture, the expert advice that the public receives concerning catastrophes like the September 11 attacks and the financial crisis often turns out to be unreliable.

Trust is, of course, always somewhat of a gamble, a risky investment in which one may eventually be made to look unwise or foolish (Luhmann, 1979). Publics need to decide one way or another on the trustworthiness of official pronouncements and assessments, despite the lack of scientific or technical expertise on the part of most lay persons. Frequently, such decisions are made on the basis of local knowledge that experts may lack, or with the consultation of friends, family, or co-workers (Wynne, 1996; Mythen, 2007). Despite Beck's assertion that the emergence of a risk society mitigates the importance of social class, one's decision to trust in

expert opinions is likely informed by many social factors such as class, age, ethnicity, and gender (Mythen, 2007). Thus, to discount the public trust placed in official pronouncements about terrorism or financial crisis is to flirt with elitism, and possibly to misinterpret public opinion, since "observation of no dissent cannot be taken to mean that trust exists and alienation does not" (Wynne, 1996, p. 49).

Nevertheless, many academics and cultural critics have been bothered by the public's response to these disasters, and have blamed mass media and popular culture for what they believe was a highly manipulated, overly nationalistic public reaction, especially regarding September 11. Some have argued that the media-led obsession with those attacks and their aftermath belied an alarmingly voyeuristic public appetite for increasingly hyper-real spectacles. Often the case has been made that inflated levels of spectatorship and consumerism resulted in the naive public acceptance of the Bush Administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and general support for the larger War on Terror. In this way, critics have equated consumerism with a simplistic audience of "cultural dupes" (see Slater, 1997) whose opinions are highly amenable to sensationalism and manipulation.

One of the best examples of such commentary came from Frederic Jameson, who wrote:

> Looking back at September 11 discloses a dissociation of sensibility, in which on the one hand we remember unrealistic visuals of a special effects or computer graphics type, showing airplanes striking tall and massive edifices, and on the other we recall an amalgamation of media sentiment and emotion, which it would be inexact to call hysterical, since even this hysteria struck many of us, from the outset, as being utterly insincere (Jameson, 2002, p. 297).

Later in the same piece, Jameson went on to "deny that it is natural and self-explanatory for masses of people to be devastated by catastrophe in which they have lost no one they know, in a place with which they have no particular connections" and to wonder "Is nationality really so natural a function of human or even social being… is pity or sympathy really so innate a feature

of the human constitution?" (Jameson, 2002, p. 298). Though it is certainly true that disasters have no "natural" responses, and that all reactions to catastrophes are in one way or another culturally constituted, the idea that the mass mediation of such sentiments today necessarily marks them as "insincere" is problematic. In a contemporary consumer culture inundated with a glut of mass-mediated social influences, one must either abandon the notion that any emotion can ever be sincere, or seek a more nuanced understanding of cultural responses to disaster that does not automatically disparage these responses because they are mediated or consumed.

The theme of manipulation in studies of September 11 and the mass media does rightfully recognize the constructedness of news stories, and the ability of media frames to influence audience perceptions. However, the financial crisis engendered more varied public opinion that was more critical of authorities, despite somewhat similar levels of media frenzy early on, and despite similar rhetorical strategies and frameworks employed in support of government responses. It is clear, then, that disasters do not necessarily create unanimity of opinion among those who consume them. Even when there appears to be wide agreement among the public concerning some disaster-related risks, one must keep in mind that public opinion itself is a reified construct of pundits and polling organizations, a political tool which masks the fact that "the state of opinion at a given moment is a system of forces, of tensions" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 224). Such polls and surveys tend to construct the illusion of consensus out of an initial diversity of idiosyncratic views; they often serve as "powerful tools for misrepresenting, even forging, public opinion" (Ewen, 1996, p. 187).

But allowing for the accuracy and legitimacy of surveys and opinion polls still lets us question a central premise of critics like Jameson: that manipulation on the part of elites yields insincerity on the part of the public. In a risk society, the public is asked to put trust in experts

when making its own evaluations of risk, but as Beck (1992) pointed out, institutions and governments have become skilled at managing risks in the public relations sense, and are increasingly able to define minority views as alarmist while invoking trust in expertise to support almost any position at all. In such a context, then, it is not the accuracy of risk claims or even the sincerity of those making them which appears to account for their resonance.

Instead, sincerity has been replaced by authenticity as a goal of both personal and institutional relations in contemporary Western culture (Giddens, 1990; see also Trilling, 1972). Giddens described this shift in personal relations in these terms: "a friend is not someone who always speaks the truth, but someone who protects the emotional well-being of the other" (Giddens, 1990, p. 119). The contemporary style of journalism, advertising, and mass consumption surrounding disasters demonstrates this changing understanding of trust. Contemporary media texts demonstrate a heightened concern for the emotional well-being of victims and survivors of tragic events, at least partially in order to establish themselves as genuine or authentic. This helps explain why financial crisis news coverage featured the voices of laid-off workers more than the voices of banking executives, for instance. Those who consume disasters via newspapers, television, and the Internet, or even advertisements, t-shirts, and tourism, have been invited to grieve, to fear, and to vent their anger right alongside empathetic anchormen, spokespersons, and fellow consumers. Such seemingly authentic sentiment invites the public's trust in ways that might be misleading, but which nonetheless produce widely held, strongly felt emotions that cannot rightfully be called insincere.

Authorities do appear to have taken note of these shifting public expectations surrounding risk communications. Brown and Michael (2002) studied the public relations work of a large European pharmaceutical company engaged in the controversial practice of transplanting animal

tissues into humans, and found that the company publicized its behind-the-scenes agonizing over difficult decisions concerning animal research due to its desire to have its reassurances on the subject appear authentic. The authors argued that

> such transparency entails a movement from authority to 'authenticity', and in particular, authenticity signified by suffering, pain, agony and the like. That is to say, social conventions that structure the performance of suffering and pain are drawn upon in order to help establish openness and transparency in the determination of risks: this discursive and practical repertoire of feelings, emotions and affect serves to signal authenticity or genuineness which in turn serves to establish transparency and openness… Emotional suffering is the 'ultimate' (in the present cultural context) marker of reality and truth. If someone is in pain, there is no doubt they are being authentic (Brown and Michael, 2002, p. 261).

The fearful pronunciations of news anchors and government officials during the attacks of September 11 project this same sort of authenticity. It is based on a raw display of painful emotions rather than the authority that comes from one's position within a system of legal or technical experts, or even on a detailed explanation of the facts by those sorts of experts. After all, as Luhmann has noted, "the accumulation of arguments" actually "betrays an uncertainty which can lead to the withdrawal of trust" (1979, p. 30). The sheer emotional impact of disasters can circumvent the need or possibility for reasoned public debate about the further risks that such crises expose, since trust during crisis conditions today develops out of the mass-mediated experience of shared emotions and psychic pain.

Although every disaster has real, and often deadly, consequences for those it directly affects, the public perception of disasters stems instead from the conditions of their mediation. In this sense, not all catastrophes are created equally authentic. The news coverage of September 11, especially in the first eight hours or so after the attacks began, stands out for its undeniable authenticity. Formal elements of standard news coverage broke down on September 11, and in their place they left various audio-visual clues as to the uniqueness of the horrifying spectacle

unfolding in real-time on every major television network. “The main features of the Manhattan visuals are random shots, erratic camera movements, imperfect focus and framing, and camera lenses covered in white dust. This is clearly a projection of unstaged reality” (Chouliaraki, 2004, p. 191). Such a jarring break from normal television routines, even many of those routines usually associated with breaking news (see Gans 1979), announced to the spectator that something different, something real, was happening. These images emotionally involved viewers in the unfolding disaster with an almost unprecedented intensity.

The emotional reactions engendered by the earliest September 11 news footage varied from angry denunciation of the terrorists who caused such destruction, to overwhelmingly sentimental outpourings towards police, firemen, and other first responders, to grief for the thousands of victims that spectators could not help but imagine had perished as the World Trade Center crumbled. But as Chouliaraki has pointed out, such emotional evocations also “close off the possibility of representing suffering in alternate ways” (2004, p. 195). Late-day news coverage on 9/11 already featured juxtapositions of images like the planes hitting the towers, anguished victims, and Osama Bin Laden shooting a gun. Such montages set up a melodramatic contrast between a victimized America and a villainous Bin Laden that seemed to necessitate retributive action (Anker, 2005). As such, the aura or authenticity of even the earliest 9/11 news coverage was no guarantee against authorities’ attempts at controlling the exercises in meaning-making and risk-assessment that followed.

The footage of the September 11 attacks, experienced in real time by so many spectators across the United States and the world, projected a kind of authenticity that had no analogue in financial crisis coverage, given that the financial crisis had no single culminating event, and no spectacular or iconic imagery. News organizations sought out amateur or accidental images of

the 9/11 attacks for months and even years afterwards, and even the steel pulled from the WTC rubble was treated as sacred, but the financial crisis did not generate a similar set of images to chase down or artifacts to venerate. Of course, the aura associated with these kind of objects is not intrinsically valuable: American culture transforms this kind of "haunting artifact" into a commodity and occasionally, as with the Zapruder film, a national treasure (Vågnes, 2005). The various images from September 11 of planes striking the towers, people fleeing a giant cloud of dust and debris, and fire-fighters combing the smoking wreckage have achieved iconic status in popular culture. The same cannot be said for any single image or set of images from the financial crisis, despite the news media's frequent use of video depicting empty Bear Stearns offices or foreclosure signs in front of suburban homes. This also stands in stark contrast to the photographs of downtrodden farm workers and men standing in breadlines that were created to publicize New Deal solutions to the Great Depression (Ewen, 1996). Given the lack of any defining image or discrete, encapsulating moment of shared national spectatorship related to the financial crisis, it makes sense that the public failed to find the financial crisis as authentic a threat as terrorism, and also failed to accept official assessments of risks or proposed policy solutions as readily as they had after September 11, despite the very similar frameworks that were employed in the media coverage of both catastrophes.

Conclusion: The Paradoxes of Authenticity

Having argued that contemporary American culture places a high value on authenticity, that such authenticity increasingly trumps traditional forms of authority or expertise in lending credence to various forms of risk communication, and that the differing perceptions of authenticity surrounding the public experience of September 11 and the financial crisis help explain why the former engendered more trust in government than the latter, one must

nonetheless admit that the very notion of authenticity is fraught with paradox. The designation of a place or event as authentic necessarily comes from "outside" or at least, from outsiders who watch with a form of connoisseurship alien to those whose lives are embedded in these events or contexts (Zukin, 2010). Thus, it bears repeating that the authenticity or reality attributed to disasters constitutes an aesthetic judgment, one which no one who is actually running from a crumbling building, or trapped on a flooded rooftop, or even watching his company's stock lose its entire value is likely to make. Indeed, disaster survivors frequently remark on the surreal nature of the experience, not its authenticity.

On the surface, the notion that this form of authenticity engenders public trust may not appear problematic. But the cases of September 11 and the financial crisis suggest that such authenticity, when applied to disasters, has the paradoxical effect of empowering various forms of framing or, less charitably, manipulation. In essence, the authenticity of disaster is likely to inspire a variety of inauthentic attempts at steering public opinion. Of course, popular culture does not always require an authentic threat in order to influence the public's political and consumption choices, as evidenced by scares like the infamous British panic over "violent" youth gangs who were fairly harmless in reality (Cohen, 1980) or, more recently, the millennial panic over a Y2K computer bug that never materialized. Nevertheless, the more real that a crisis appears as it unfolds in live media broadcasts, the more it is felt to be a genuine threat to even distant audiences, then the more likely that such a crisis inspires a host of wholly inauthentic attempts to capitalize on the public trust that emerges.

For example, the Bush Administration steered the country into two wars and passed a sprawling piece of civil-liberty-infringing legislation on the strength of the trust and authenticity associated with September 11, though these policies were based on some misleading or simply

false assumptions about who was responsible and how best to avoid future attacks. Such attempts to capitalize on the disaster did not stop with government officials or security consultants, however. Mass media and consumer culture not only generated a host of texts and products designed to cash in on the widespread post-9/11 interest in security, terrorism, or the events of September 11 themselves, they did so in ways which fed back into official risk assessments and risk prevention strategies. For instance, the use of torture by the character Jack Bauer on Fox's popular television program *24* has been cited by numerous government officials as an inspiration for, or in defense of, the harsh interrogation tactics at Guantanamo and elsewhere. As Dahlia Lithwick has pointed out:

> John Yoo, the former Justice Department lawyer who produced the so-called torture memos… cites Bauer in his book "War by Other Means." "What if, as the Fox television program '24' recently portrayed, a high-level terrorist leader is caught who knows the location of a nuclear weapon?" Even Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, speaking in Canada last summer, shows a gift for this casual toggling between television and the Constitution. "Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles … He saved hundreds of thousands of lives," Scalia said. "Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?" (Lithwick, 2008, para. 4).

These harsh interrogation techniques, as well as the even more wanton abuse and torture of detainees at Guantanamo that eventually came to light, have likely inspired further anti-American sentiment and acts of terrorism, despite the assurances provided by the exploits of a fictional television character. Similarly, the parachutes marketed to executives hoping to jump safely from their office buildings in the event of a terrorist attack may end up causing more harm than they alleviate, since the wind shears and turbulence from the fires would make safe parachuting almost impossible (ABC News, n.d.), while the option of a parachute may also result in people giving up too early on the search for more realistic escape routes.

Thus the consumption of disaster exhibits the same sorts of reflexivity and feedback effects associated with classic forms of risk management. This has been true in the financial

crisis as well, which has inspired its share of uncertainty and fear despite its perception as somewhat less authentic than September 11. For instance, FOX News's Glenn Beck has capitalized on these fears by instructing his television and radio audiences to buy gold as protection from financial uncertainty, without disclosing that he is a paid spokesman for a company that sells gold, and despite the fact that the high price of gold today may make it an especially poor investment, thereby further imperiling the finances of those who follow this advice (Media Matters for America, 2009). Moreover, such fear-mongering by influential media personalities may actually hinder real economic recovery, since part of what ails the economy is a lack of public trust in its long-term prospects. As Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and National Economic Council director Larry Summers explained, "the current crisis is a crisis of confidence and trust. Reassuring the American people that our financial system will be better controlled is critical to our economic recovery" (Geithner and Summers, 2009, para. 17). Yet trust and confidence can be achieved through rhetoric as easily as regulation and reform. As such, it is little surprise that the risks posed by "Too Big to Fail" banks, with their credit default swaps and derivatives trades, remained largely unaddressed in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act that President Obama signed into law on July 21, 2010 (Thompson, 2010; The Week, 2010).

All this suggests that a new model of risk communication has indeed ascended within American media and political culture. Rather than being sensitized to risks that authorities believe they have under control, or even scared about invented risks that fail to actually materialize (see Glassner, 1999), Americans today increasingly engage in the consumption of realized risks—disasters. We learn of a threat, or are reminded of its existence, by watching it realized as a real-life disaster on television news broadcasts or over the Internet, and then we

alter our opinions and behaviors accordingly. The trust we vest in the post-disaster assessments and policy proposals of officials, experts, and pundits is roughly proportional to the perceived authenticity of the disaster we have just experienced. Likewise, the more genuine we believe the disaster and its continued threat to us, the more likely we are to consume new disaster-related products and services, as well as to acquiesce to new restrictions or limitations on other forms of consumption, such as the security procedures at airports or the warrantless wiretapping of Americans' personal communications that were put into effect after September 11. While public support, or at least tolerance, for these measures has faded over time, the authenticity of the 9/11 attacks assured that dissenting voices on those matters were squarely in the minority in the years immediately afterward.

This consumption of disaster means that contemporary risk management has grown increasingly retrospective. More and more, risk prevention strategies seem designed to deal with threats that have already materialized, or disasters that have just taken place, rather than to anticipate potential dangers and mitigate future risks that might still be prevented. Products like executive parachutes, or security procedures involving the removal of one's shoes at airports, are designed to prevent scenarios that have already happened, and for that reason alone are cause for concern. The U.S. government, under both Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, appears unable or unwilling to engage in the difficult task of convincing the public about threats that have yet to happen or that are happening slowly, such as climate change. Indeed, warnings about terrorism existed in the months preceding September 11, and warnings about the precarious state of the financial industry were made before this recent crisis (*The Economist*, 2009, July 16), but these went largely unheeded by official policymakers and mainstream punditry until after they resulted in spectacular disasters. The reasons for this

reticence to engage in more traditional forms of risk communication and prevention are complicated, and involve more than simply the hyper-consumerist state of contemporary American culture. But this consumerism certainly plays a part; in a culture in which politicians brand and advertise themselves like commodities, and corporations play an increasingly large role in politics, the public generally reserves its trust for only the most undeniably authentic phenomena. Disasters frequently fit this criterion but, unfortunately, by the time disaster has struck the most effective risk management strategies have been rendered worthless. Instead, the strategies of risk communication and prevention that tend to follow disasters in American political and consumer culture are designed more to capitalize on the real emotions that such disasters have generated than to make sure that the next disaster is really avoided.

Chapter Three

Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, and the Empathetic Gaze

Introduction

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, Paula Bealer watched on television from 350 miles away. Despite the fact that she and her family had safely evacuated, she began to weep. This weeping continued in the weeks following the storm, as she described in an essay written for the website *Helium*: "I grieved intensely for those that were lost in the hurricane as though they were my own loved ones. I cried tears of pain for the homes and all the family mementos lost in the devastation. I cried for businesses that people worked so hard to establish just to have them washed away so quickly. I felt the weariness of the rescue workers who despite all their efforts were unable to save everyone" (Bealer, n.d., para. 3).

Coleman Collins, a former basketball player at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), experienced the tragic shootings on his campus in somewhat similar terms. He watched the television coverage from the safety of his girlfriend's house, while making phone calls and using Facebook to figure out if anyone he knew had been harmed. In an entry on ESPN's *TrueHoop* blog, he explained:

> As it turned out I didn't know anyone personally. People always give off a sigh of relief when I tell them this… How could I explain that because I didn't know anyone who was killed that day, that everyone I know was killed that day? There will be people that read this who personally knew victims. Trust me, I can't compete with your pain, but God… I didn't know I could feel that way. I think they call it empathy. So yeah, that was the day I realized what empathy was (Collins, 2010, para 7-8).

Bealer also described her experience as one of empathy. She lauded this powerful sentiment and wrote: "As intense of an emotion as empathy is, I never regret being able to feel it. In my

opinion, empathy is an emotion that connects us to each other. How else would we begin to understand the pain of others without actually feeling it?" (Bealer, n.d., para. 13).

Of course, her question need not be taken rhetorically. The pain of others has not always been apprehended or experienced in the ways that American culture encourages us to today. Disasters have obviously always evoked strong emotions in those they have directly affected, as well as those who have watched from afar or who have learned of them after the fact; bearing witness to the misfortunes of others has always had the potential to generate a feeling of commiseration and a desire to help those unfortunate others. But the precise nature of this feeling and the socially appropriate forms of help have changed over time. As disasters have assumed a prominent role in contemporary popular culture, and as the news media have developed the ability to transmit footage of mass catastrophes across the globe almost instantaneously, the norms surrounding emotion and the spectatorship of suffering have adapted and evolved. Alternative "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977) and new "emotional regimes" (Reddy, 2001) have appeared to challenge the prevailing norms and rituals governing emotional expression in today's heavily mediated and consumed experience of disasters.

Chief among these adaptations has been the inducement to empathize with distant, suffering others. This change has been reflected in American consumer culture generally, and specifically in the consumer products and media texts associated with Hurricane Katrina and the April 16, 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech. The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings reflected a particular way of seeing others and relating to their pain and misfortune. When contrasted with Enlightenment ideas about emotional expression, and even with more recent examples of mass-mediated emotion in the wake of tragic events, it appears that media technologies and aesthetics have encouraged a new kind of spectatorship

accompanied by a shift in ways of apprehending and experiencing the emotional pain and distress of distant others.

This chapter examines the cultural products that emerged from Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, paying specific attention to the codes surrounding emotional expression that they exhibit. After a general overview of the consumption and mediation of both disasters, the chapter will focus on four particular media products that exemplify current trends. Discursive analysis of the September 2, 2005 broadcast of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* ("*AC 360*") and the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008) will provide evidence about specific features of the consumption of disaster during Hurricane Katrina, while the *NBC Nightly News* broadcast from April 18, 2007 and an episode of the Biography channel's show *I Survived*, which dealt with the Virginia Tech shootings, will offer similar evidence concerning that tragedy's mediation.

In these programs, aesthetic and technological cues about the authenticity of media texts served as de-facto evidence of the personal, emotional authenticity of their producers and audiences. Moreover, these cultural products announced a change in notions of spectatorship relative to classical discussions concerning the moral ramifications of the suffering of others. Whereas classical notions of sympathy required one to act or speak out on behalf of the suffering other, these texts evinced a shift away from sympathy and toward empathy as the moral responsibility of the spectator. This chapter argues that, as mass mediation has increased the amount of attention paid to tragedies and catastrophes, and therapeutic culture has placed increasing value on emotional intelligence and the ability to adapt to multiple roles or identities, a new empathetic ideal of understanding what the other is going through and reacting emotionally to the other's emotional state has emerged alongside an older, sympathetic moral

requirement to actually act in ways that help alleviate the suffering of others. Whether or not this represents the emergence of an entirely new emotional regime, or the simply the growth of some alternative structures of feeling, this empathetic style of relating to mass suffering is clearly evident in popular culture surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, and therefore worthy of further investigation.

The Consumption of Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech Shootings

Though the U.S. government and residents of the Gulf Coast had been informed by meteorologists and news services for two to three days about Hurricane Katrina's impending landfall in the region, the storm that hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005 found a city unprepared, as Mayor Nagin's late evacuation plans put little to no emphasis on the fate of the city's poor or otherwise immobile residents, and state and federal preparations were similarly short-sighted or inadequate (Dyson, 2006). The storm caused an estimated $81 billion worth of damage in the area (Nordhaus, 2006), and resulted in the deaths of at least 1,577 people, although many are still listed as missing (Hunter, 2006). As the deadly aftermath of the storm came into focus, officials like President Bush and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Michael Brown emphasized, as many officials had done after September 11, that no one could have imagined this kind of devastation, despite the fact that weather forecasters had accurately predicted the strength of the storm and that the weakness of New Orleans' levees and its vulnerability to hurricanes had been well established in the mainstream press and in FEMA's own reports (Dyson, 2006).

Katrina was the first major hurricane to hit the United States with the accompaniment of continuous coverage by the 24-hour news networks. Initially, the inaccessibility of many affected areas of the Gulf Coast to the news media meant that small pockets of survivors received a

disproportionate amount of coverage (Shrum, 2007). The immediacy demanded of such coverage during disaster situations tended to contravene the generally time-consuming processes of collecting and reporting facts, which led in this case to a particularly virulent strain of traffic in rumor and innuendo in the storm's immediate aftermath (Rodriguez & Dynes, 2006). The news media has received harsh criticism for its depiction of racial minorities in New Orleans as either violent looters or passive victims, and its sensational implications that the city had fallen into chaos (Voorhees, Vick, & Perkins, 2007; Rodriguez & Dynes, 2006). These reports became a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, as law enforcement officers and residents alike began to believe that the city had indeed fallen into lawlessness, and responded in ways which exacerbated this lack of civic trust (Miller, 2006). However, news media were also frequently critical of the inadequate scope and insufficient pace of government rescue and recovery efforts. Without the usual level of access to government sources in the early days of the storm, news reporters broke from the kinds of unifying themes so prominent after September 11 and instead adopted an outraged, populist tone (Durham, 2008). In fact, television news frequently portrayed its own reporters, producers, and camera crews as heroes "fighting the evil that was government ineptitude" (Fry, 2006, p. 83).

Thousands of Americans were moved by this media coverage to volunteer their time or money to relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina victims, and Hurricane Rita's victims were eventually added to many relief funds, as that storm hit the area a month later. Just eleven weeks after Katrina, private donations totaled $2.7 billion (Frank, 2005), and the website *Charity Navigator* estimated the total amount of donations after four years at $6.5 billion (Miniutti, 2009). Though organizations like the Red Cross, which by one estimate received 60% of all Katrina-related donations (Strom, 2006), handled the bulk of the immediate relief work, new

constituencies came together, especially in the African-American community. Black churches and political organizations raised millions, and many African-American artists and athletes organized telethons, raised money, and promoted volunteer efforts (Dyson, 2006).

New Orleans' musical reputation was reflected in charity and relief efforts as well. Hip-hop artists responded in song to the issues raised by Katrina, as Harvard University's *Hip-Hop Archive* has begun to chronicle with its "Katrina Knows" section, and musicians from a variety of genres have contributed to Katrina-related benefit CDs and concerts. Many of these albums, like *Our New Orleans: A Benefit Album for the Gulf Coast*, *A Celebration of New Orleans Music*, and *Hurricane Relief: Come Together Now*, focus on musicians and music from New Orleans. Individual artists or groups with no particular connection to New Orleans have also recorded songs on their own and released them as radio singles and iTunes downloads, such as when rock icons Green Day and U2 jointly recorded "The Saints are Coming" and sold the song to benefit New Orleans musicians.

Those groups also combined to perform the song live at the beginning of the NFL's *Monday Night Football* broadcast on September 25, 2006, which showcased the first game played in New Orleans' Superdome since it had been used as a mass shelter for Katrina evacuees and had suffered severe storm damage. Much in the same way that the 2001 New York Yankees came to symbolize that city's rebuilding efforts upon the baseball season's post-September 11 resumption—the symbolism was so potent that Mayor Giuliani spent more time with the Yankees in the forty days after the attacks than with Ground Zero rescue workers (Koppleman, 2007)—the New Orleans Saints became the symbol for New Orleans' post-Katrina reconstruction. Unable to play their home games in the Superdome for the entire 2005 season, the team's success in its renovated stadium the following year and its Super Bowl victory a few

seasons later were greeted by sportscasters and journalists as a sign that the city itself was overcoming the storm's material and psychological tolls.

Television producers, musicians, and entertainment industry stars also teamed up for "A Concert for Hurricane Relief," which was broadcast live on NBC and its affiliated networks on September 2, 2005, and was most notable for rapper and producer Kanye West's live, unscripted pronouncement that, among other things, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." Eight and a half million people watched the telethon-style broadcast, which raised $50 million for the Red Cross. The next week, the six largest U.S. networks broadcasted a similar telethon-style concert entitled "Shelter from the Storm," and other networks like Black Entertainment Television (BET) held their own fundraisers and benefits.

Americans consumed other Hurricane Katrina-related products besides news broadcasts, football games, and star-studded telethons. T-shirts commemorating the storm, announcing one's survivor status, and playfully or angrily criticizing the government's response are still for sale today. One website, dopplerduds.com, has over 60 Katrina-themed designs for sale, as well as designs commemorating a host of other storms and natural disasters. Actress Teri Hatcher designed a series of t-shirts whose sales benefitted Katrina charities, and other companies like Major League Baseball and the surf apparel company Bad Tuna also produced such t-shirts. Writers and publishers have created a host of novels and non-fiction books about the storm in a variety of genres: exposés, survivors' accounts, fictional detective novels, collections of photojournalism, children's books, and hurricane survival guides. The story of Hurricane Katrina has also been told in a variety of documentary films, most notably Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), as well as in television programs made by The Discovery Channel, NOVA, ABC News, and National Geographic. Survivors themselves have created

amateur films and sold them online, like *Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans: Before During and After* (2006), which is full of firsthand footage of Katrina shot by self-described "weather paparazzi" Douglas Kiesling when he travelled to New Orleans to film the storm. Hollywood also has plans to capitalize on Katrina; Dimension Films also produced a feature film called *Hurricane Season* (2009), starring Forrest Whittaker as the basketball coach at a Louisiana high school dealing with the storm's aftermath.

Other, more kitschy Katrina-related souvenirs included a Beanie Baby bear dedicated to Katrina survivors. One dollar from the sale of each bear went to the Red Cross, and the inside of the bear's tag read "In memory of those who lost their homes, their loved ones, or their lives, as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Together we're a stronger nation." Sturken (2007) has argued that after September 11, people purchased these sorts of sentimental and childlike expressions of comfort to emphasize the nation's innocence, its lack of responsibility for the new threat of terrorism that had presented itself. The same may be true of a post-Katrina nation looking to avoid examining its own culpability in the kinds of persistent urban poverty that magnified the effects of breached levees and flood waters.

Clearly then, American audiences and consumers engaged with the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in a wide variety of ways that reflected the storm's cultural ubiquity through the latter part of 2005. Disasters such as major hurricanes serve to unify large swaths of popular culture and mass media, and generate the kinds of shared public experiences that have grown rare with the segmentation of media audiences. Live broadcasts of planned, state-organized "media events" used to fill this unifying role (Dayan and Katz, 1992), but the increased fragmentation of media markets and the explosion of available television channels have decreased their influence (Katz, 1996). Instead, massive disruptions like disasters or terrorist attacks have replaced staged,

ceremonial media events as the most widely televised and publicized phenomena in the contemporary public sphere (Katz & Liebes, 2007). Moreover, the variety of star-studded, televised memorials, benefits, and documentaries that followed Hurricane Katrina, coupled with ongoing news coverage of its aftermath, had a monopolistic hold on popular culture similar to classic media events such as Olympic Games, royal weddings, or the funeral of John F. Kennedy, for example.

The April 16, 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech, while similarly dominating the news media, had a somewhat shorter staying power in popular culture. However, the demands for immediate coverage, constant updates of news stories, and frequent interviews with victims or survivors that were so apparent during Hurricane Katrina remained part of the news network protocol in this tragedy as well. Reporters quickly flocked to the campus of Virginia Tech as word spread of a shooting there, and they, or the stations' news anchors, relayed each new tidbit of information as soon as it was released. The reporters pushed for interviews with clearly shaken students who were still trying to cope with the shooting and learn the whereabouts of friends. Television networks set up temporary studios on campus, broadcasting entire programs like NBC's *Today* from inside the school, and backlash against the heavy media presence on campus quickly emerged among students and faculty (Gravois and Hoover, 2007).

The most controversial news coverage came two days later, when *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* decided to air portions of a package it had received from killer Seung Hui Cho himself, likely mailed between his double murder at the West Ambler Johnston residence hall and his mass shooting at the Norris Hall classroom building later that morning. The package contained what Williams referred to on-air as a "multi-media manifesto," consisting of various kinds of electronic images, videos, and text created by Cho to be aired after his shootings. Many

criticized NBC's decision to show some of these photos and videos, but it helped make the show the most watched of the evening newscasts that week, by a large margin (Steinberg, 2007). Cho's own familiarity with new electronic media was matched by that of Virginia Tech's students, who used social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook to communicate with one another and memorialize fallen friends in the shootings' aftermath (Creamer, 2007).

Beside their electronic commemorations, students at Virginia Tech set up several makeshift memorials in the physical space of the campus, and consumers across America and the world took it upon themselves to support the university by purchasing Virginia Tech athletic apparel and other Hokies memorabilia. Wholesale sales of such items rose to more than $5.6 million for the period between April 1 and June 30; this represented a jump of between $1 million and $2.6 million over similar quarters in years past. In the weeks after the shootings, the school also received numerous phone calls from vendors seeking licenses to sell Virginia Tech products, but they were all turned down (Bowman, 2007). Thousands of other spontaneous donations to the university in the wake of the shootings were eventually culled into the Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund, $8 million of which has now been distributed among the seventeen injured and the families of the 32 killed in the shootings. One victim's tragic death was even transformed into an inspirational book entitled *Lifting Our Eyes: Finding God's Grace Through the Virginia Tech Tragedy, The Lauren McCain Story*.

Critics used the Virginia Tech shootings as an indictment against popular culture in many respects. As has become routine in the wake of school shootings, commentators suggested that violent media were to blame (Furedi, 2007). Some focused on Cho's "addiction to a ghastly, violent video game called Counter-Strike" (Stephen, 2007, p. 20), while others noticed the similarity between a pose in one of Cho's photos and a scene from a South Korean revenge film

called *Oldboy* (2003), which then began to receive blame despite the fact that no one could confirm that Cho had ever seen it (Scott, 2007). Many were troubled by NBC's handling of Cho's words and images, both in terms of their potential effects on already traumatized victims and their families, and also their potential to inspire other disaffected youth to commit "copycat" killings—a concern made somewhat less far-fetched by the fact that Cho specifically referred to the Columbine shooters in his own writings (Deppa, 2007). The American Psychiatric Association even issued a press release on April 20 urging the news media to stop airing Cho's images. As a result, many questioned the very role of news reporting in a tragedy such as this. One critic pointed out the particularly crass way in which news channels used graphics to brand their coverage of catastrophes, noting that, for instance, "CNN's animated MASSACRE AT VIRGINIA TECH logo throbbed and twirled with all the subtlety of an 'American Idol' bumper" (Dumenco, 2007, p. 34). Others criticized the tone of such news broadcasts:

> Shortly after announcing that the shooting had become the largest campus massacre ever, eclipsing the 1966 Texas Tower sniping, television commentators declared, with nearly gleeful enthusiasm, that it had surpassed in carnage all other mass shootings in the United States at any venue. For the remainder of the day, viewers were told repeatedly that the Virginia Tech massacre had been the biggest, the bloodiest, the absolute worst, the most devastating, or whatever other superlatives came to mind (Fox, 2008, para 3).

Consumers of the Virginia Tech shootings themselves, these critics nonetheless called for a broader examination of the production of news reports and other violent media as a way to avoid future tragedies. Though some find this very line of criticism hypocritical (see Kellner, 2008), it remains a recurring theme in the discourse on disaster and mediation, and one that some television networks have taken to heart. For instance, Fox News Channel decided to stop showing clips from Cho's manifesto, stating that they saw "no reason to continue assaulting the public with these disturbing and demented images" (quoted in Park, 2008, p. 1).

Similar themes appeared as well in the debate over Hurricane Katrina's media coverage. The frequent reports of looting, sniper fire, rape, and murder in New Orleans in the aftermath of the storm turned out to be largely fabrications, but the absence of significant government intervention in the region during that first week made the reporting of such unconfirmed rumors more problematic than usual, as many government decision-makers believed these reports and tailored their relief plans accordingly, or echoed them back to other media outlets. Mayor Nagin dramatically demonstrated this process when he appeared on *Oprah* parroting claims about "hooligans killing people, raping people" in the Superdome that were subsequently proven false (quoted in Dyson, 2006, p. 171). These visions of chaos resonated with the conventional wisdom—roundly debunked by many disaster sociologists (see for instance Rodriguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli, 2006) but perpetuated by Hollywood disaster movies—that mass catastrophes invariably cause social breakdown and anarchy. They also resonated with a white audience's negative racial stereotypes about the predominantly poor, African-American population who remained in the city (Kierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 2006; Voorhees, Vick, & Perkins, 2007). Thus, as with the Virginia Tech shootings, media criticism of Hurricane Katrina coverage focused on the issue of sensationalism. In New Orleans, at a time when few state or federal officials, and none of the general public, were in a position to know what was really happening on the ground, the news media could not resist putting the most dramatic and sensational spin on these already incredibly dramatic events, and they did so by appealing in many cases to people's worst opinions of human nature or their most vile racial prejudices.

Nevertheless, millions watched the television coverage of both tragedies. Many donated money directly to relief efforts or memorial funds, while others bought athletic apparel, charity t-shirts, commemorative books, and benefit concert tickets or recordings. Still others consumed in

ways that provided no direct economic assistance to the victims at all, as with certain Hurricane Katrina souvenir t-shirts or fictional novels set during the storm. But more than simply enabling charity or expressions of solidarity, media technology and consumer culture have also been the focus of many of the proposed solutions to the problems that remain in these tragedies' aftermaths. Despite the ferver with which some attacked mass media as a cause of violence after the Virginia Tech shootings, the main set of preventative measures adopted at colleges and universities across the country in the wake of those shootings involved the creation of early-warning systems that sent emails and text messages to students' computers and cell phones (Fox & Savage, 2009). And New Orleans has attempted to quickly rebound from the disaster with the help of tourism, since its French Quarter has always been the most visited area of the city, and was least affected by the flooding. Many companies have even offered tours of the devastated and still barely rebuilt areas of the city (Park, 2006). Moreover, filmmakers like Spike Lee have sought to keep the tragedy of the hurricane, and the continued efforts at recovery, in the public eye through a series of documentary films.

One can safely say, then, that mass media and consumer culture are fundamental to the American experience of these two disasters. Although criticisms of the inaccuracy and stereotyping in early disaster news coverage have certainly proven valid, the broader charge of sensationalism leveled at some media texts concerning Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings seems outmoded, given the long tradition in modern media of publicizing the suffering of others. In fact, the moral and ethical problems posed by the suffering of distant others have been a subject of philosophical discourse for centuries. However, dominant views on the subject have changed over time, as have norms concerning the appropriate behavior of those bearing witness to others' misfortune. Such a change appears to be at work in the contemporary experience of

disaster as well, thereby requiring a new effort to understand the emotional style of disaster consumption and its place among older ways of apprehending tragedy and the pain of others.

Pity, Compassion, Sympathy, and Empathy

Even the most cynical observer would surely not object to the notion that at least some of those who engage in disaster consumption do so out of what appears to be genuine concern for the victims and survivors of those disasters. The precise nature of that sort of concern for the suffering of others has been the subject of a variety of debates throughout history. But as these debates have evolved, the terms for that concern, be they *pity*, *compassion*, *sympathy*, or *empathy*, have become somewhat confused and intertwined. At one extreme they are used synonymously to convey a generalized sense of consideration for the other; at the other extreme they are subject to semantic debates within specialized scholarly traditions. Since, however, this chapter makes certain arguments about the changing experience of this sort of emotion, the best way to disentangle these definitional questions is to historicize the terms of the debate. Although the terminology describing one's regard for the well-being of others has been translated in somewhat idiosyncratic ways over the years, it remains possible to assign particular terms and meanings to particular epochs or movements, each with its own mode of understanding and experiencing the suffering of others.

The ancient Greeks generally looked down upon emotional reactions to the suffering of others, regarding pity as a vice, not a virtue, to be mastered rather than indulged. Aristotle questioned the selfish character of pity, recognizing that people tend to pity those who most resemble themselves (Orwin, 2008). Later thinkers of antiquity like Cicero remarked on pity's fleeting nature, stating that "nothing dries more quickly than a tear" (quoted in Konstan, 2001, p. 23). In some circumstances, however, Greeks and Romans did take pride in their capacity to treat

the vanquished or afflicted in a humane fashion. But this classical notion of pity did not entail the kinds of *identification* with the other that modern, Enlightenment thinkers debated; pity involved feeling *for*, not *with*, the suffering other (Konstan, 2001).

With the decline of classical civilizations and the emergence of Christianity came a new focus on charity for the poor and afflicted. This charity was different from earlier notions of pity in that it had divine inspiration, inasmuch as charitable acts were seen as signs of one's ability to overcome sinful human nature in order to love one's fellow man as Christ might. Later thinkers like Nietzsche characterized this Judeo-Christian ethic as a form of revenge against nobles and the aristocracy, since it means that "only the poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, sick, and ugly, truly blessed" (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 167). Still, the Christian inducement to aid the suffering generally had little to do with one's ability to feel or understand the pain of those unfortunates.

It was not until the Enlightenment, when Rousseau began to promote *compassion*, that a kind of naturally occurring emotional connection with unfortunate others came to be seen as a virtue (Orwin, 1997). For Rousseau, compassion consisted of man's "innate repugnance to see his kind suffer" (Rousseau, 1997, p. 152). As a basic emotional response, such feeling for the plight of others was "so Natural that even the Beasts sometimes show evident signs of it" (Ibid). Yet this commiseration with the situation of suffering others varied "in proportion as the Onlooking animal identifies more intimately with the suffering animal" (Rousseau, 1997, p. 153). This type of natural fellow-feeling resonated with Rousseau's criticism of modern society's alienating character:

> Compassion is the last refuge of nature in our state of greatest estrangement from it. It constitutes the sole remaining possibility of communion or intimacy with our fellow human beings. As the alternative to reason and amour propre, it figures…

> as the genuine, sincere, or authentic—in a word, natural—response to the present unnatural human condition (Orwin, 1997, p. 298).

In deriving this emotion from nature, rather than the divine, Rousseau and those who soon took up his case had established compassion as "post-Christian virtue" (Orwin, 2008, p. 12).

Other Enlightenment thinkers also set ought to describe emotional and moral responses to the suffering of others. The term *sympathy* was popularized by scholars like David Hume and Adam Smith, both of whom followed Rousseau's view that this form of fellow-feeling was an innate aspect of human consciousness, although their definitions of the term varied somewhat. Hume conceived of sympathy mainly as the communication or transfer of an emotion from one individual to another, a process of coming to feel what another feels rather than an emotion in and of itself (Mercer, 1972). "As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affectations readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature" (Hume, 1874, p. 335). By contrast, Smith constructed sympathy as a somewhat distanced form of identification with others. His spectator had to be detached enough from the suffering on view to ensure that no simple emotional transfer or contagion could determine his response. Instead, the spectator of distant suffering was moved to sympathy by exercising both reason and imagination: reason in order to determine that the unfortunate's claims were valid and his treatment truly unjust, and imagination to understand what the unfortunate must be feeling: "The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment" (Smith, 1869, p. 12). Once established, the moral obligations of sympathy then required the spectator to act in order to alleviate that suffering, or if the distance between he and the sufferer was too great, at least to speak out about what he had seen (Boltanski, 1999).

Though these influential voices have not been in complete alignment on the mechanisms behind this fellow-feeling, or on the precise nature of the distinction between sympathy and compassion or pity, one clear point of convergence has been the political ramifications for viewers of suffering. Rousseau's theory of compassion helped inspired the French Revolution, especially as its leaders became increasingly concerned with the lower classes of French society and the alleviation of their misery (Orwin, 1997). According to critics like Arendt, this emphasis on compassion became the Revolution's undoing: "once they had equated virtue with the qualities of the heart, [they began to] see intrigue and calumny, treachery and hypocrisy everywhere. That fateful mood of suspicion… arose directly out of the misplaced emphasis on the heart as the source of political virtue…" (Arendt, 1963, p. 91-92). This widespread belief in compassion towards others came to necessitate direct action on the part of its adherents, even if such action ultimately resulted in terror. Following Arendt (1963), Boltanski (1999) has described the entry into politics of such fellow-feeling for a class of suffering others as a move towards a "politics of pity," although he associated the move with Smith's moral theory and its detached, sympathetic spectator, rather than Rousseau's more passionate form of identification. In either case, Enlightenment conceptions of suffering and its emotional or moral effects on spectators tended to require those spectators to take some kind of action on the sufferer's behalf.

In the last hundred years, and especially the last half century, an alternative to these notions of compassion or sympathy has emerged. *Empathy* was coined in 1909 as a translation from the German *einfühlung*, meaning roughly the ability to project the self into a perceived object. Eventually coming to refer to one's awareness in imagination of the emotions of another person—a definition not far removed from Hume's description of sympathy—it has become the word of choice in psychology (Wispé, 1986). Psychologists have been encouraged to improve

their "empathic accuracy" (Ickes, 1997) by adopting a listening stance not just attuned to, but oriented from within, the patient's emotions and perspective. Empathy for psychoanalysts has become a process of "vicarious introspection" (Kohut, 1984, quoted in Bouson, 1989, p. 22). But the crucial point here is that the moral obligation to act has been removed from the equation when one shifts from sympathy to empathy. As Wispé put it, "sympathy refers to a heightened awareness of another's plight as something to be alleviated. Empathy refers to the attempt of one self-aware self to understand the subjective experiences of another self" (1986, p. 314). As a purely emotional exercise in identifying with an other, empathy blunts the political implications of Smith's notion of sympathy or the larger politics of pity associated with Rousseau and Smith.

Thus, rather than feeling sorry for someone less fortunate, or feeling an emotion corresponding to another's emotional state, or sympathizing with that other in a way that accepts a moral obligation to help, empathy refers to an intersubjective understanding of the other's plight devoid of the obligation to intervene. Although sympathy proved fundamental to democratic politics and egalitarian societies, as Tocqueville noted when describing the breadth of compassion he saw in America (2000), contemporary American culture has tended to venerate empathy not only in conjunction with the growing popularity of psychoanalysis, but more generally as psychoanalytic ideas have penetrated the marketplace. For instance, self-help books on everything from leadership to anger management emphasize the ability to empathize with the needs and perspectives of those in one's family as well as those with whom one works. Such empathic skills are seen as both strategic and moral. But rather than directing those skills towards helping others attain their needs, the act of empathizing is often seen as an end in itself, or simply a way to gain others' trust (Illouz, 2008). In this manner, the explicitly political character of sympathy as an *active* concern for another has given way to empathy's more *passive*, vicarious

character. This alternative, empathetic stance is embedded in a particular way of looking at disaster-related media, particularly those media texts that demonstrate the kind of authenticity discussed in previous chapters.

Empathy, Authenticity, and the Virginia Tech Shootings

As mentioned, one of the most controversial aspects of media coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings was the decision by *NBC Nightly News* to air portions of the digital package of pictures, videos, and text that killer Seung Hui Cho sent to NBC some time in-between his initial double-homicide and his larger mass shooting later that day. Although many found this decision to be inexcusable, and half of the respondents in one survey found the coverage of these shootings excessive (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press [Pew], 2007, April 25), a closer examination of this broadcast can illuminate some of the meanings and motivations behind this decision. The more macabre or sensationalist elements of the broadcast do not simply stem from a desire for spectacle. Rather, they appear to emerge out of the producers' attempts to elicit deeper psychological understandings of both Cho and the victims, coupled with a preoccupation with the authentic quality of the media that Cho created.

In the opening moments of this April 18, 2007 broadcast, anchor Brian Williams provocatively advertised that the program would air Cho's "last recorded words" and described the package that NBC News received as a "multi-media manifesto." As a means of establishing the authenticity of the images and videos they displayed, Williams brought out a color photocopy of the Priority Mail package in which Cho sent them, pointing out Cho's handwriting, explaining the potential significance of the name he signed, "A. Ishmael," identifying the post office's time stamp, and explaining how the incorrect address Cho left had delayed NBC's receipt of the

package for a day. The real envelope, Williams said, had already been handed over to the police, a nod to the fact that this "manifesto" was indeed evidence in a murder investigation.

Williams then began to make a somewhat more substantial acknowledgement of the ethical ramifications of broadcasting portions of Cho's package, stating: "We are sensitive to how all of this will be seen by those affected, and we know we are in effect airing the words of a murderer here tonight." The statement was an oddly unbalanced one, seemingly missing a second half that explained what the benefits of broadcasting the manifesto might be, and why they outweighed the concerns of "those affected." Such a statement never came, however. It was apparently enough for Williams to state matter-of-factly that they "are sensitive" and move on.

One implicit motivation, exemplified in one way or another by all of those on the program who commented on the images and videos, was to *understand* Cho. His manifesto was treated as a window into his soul, as an explanation for the seemingly inexplicable horror of his actions. This psychoanalytic approach was on display in an exchange between Williams and former FBI profiler Clint Van Zandt, both of whom diagnosed Cho on the basis of his manifesto as egotistic and narcissistic, and then tried to tie those personality traits to other infamous school shootings. Van Zandt described the point of the exercise thusly: "What I hope we're able to gain is not only perhaps motive that we're starting to hear right now, but what was the final catalyst, Brian, what finally broke the camel's back and moved him on. Why Monday instead of last Monday and not a week from now?" Interestingly, neither Williams nor Van Zant made the rhetorical leap of using that information to identify and stop other potential shooters. Without it, the empathetic ideal took a turn for the macabre, and the airing of Cho's video became mainly about reconstructing his mental state and decision-making process.

This macabre form of empathy came into stark focus in the actual display of Cho's photos and images. As a montage of Cho's still photos began, NBC correspondent Pete Williams narrated in voiceover: "He looks like a normal, smiling college student in only the first two. In the rest, he presents the stern face and strikes the pose that was very likely what his victims saw later on Monday. In eleven of the pictures, he aims handguns at the camera, likely the very ones he bought in the past two months." Williams went to great lengths to ascribe a kind of authenticity to these images, this time in the hopes of giving his audience some real sense of what the victims themselves must have experienced. This sort of empathy is tantamount to a vicarious thrill-ride for audiences who may be equally concerned for the victims and titillated by access to a perspective on this tragedy that is usually inaccessible. In fact, Williams' mix of solemnity and excitement about Cho's manifesto attested to a kind of aura surrounding it; these were uniquely dangerous images that Cho, in his role as their singular creator, imbued with potentially traumatizing properties. As Van Zant put it, "This is his lifetime victory, this is the way he's victimizing, further victimizing all of us by reaching out from beyond the grave and grabbing us and getting our attention and making us listen to his last rambling words and pictures."

Of course, rather than recognizing their complicity in Cho's plot to reach out "from beyond the grave," NBC's commentators presented themselves as somewhat powerless in the face of the incredible newsworthiness of Cho's manifesto. During the 30-minute program, they aired at least ten different images produced by Cho a total of 14 times, including many in which he pointed weapons at the camera, and broadcast 8 different clips of Cho's videos, in which he angrily railed against a series of anonymous targets, for over two minutes. Yet all the while, NBC's commentators counted themselves simply as members of a rhetorical "us" whom Cho

had forced to listen. This was in keeping with the empathetic ideal; the media suffered Cho's ranting alongside the audience, neither of whom had any responsibility to do anything other than try to understand. Rather than discrediting *NBC Nightly News*, or marking them as less serious or sincere than the other news networks who would all likely have aired the video as well (Kellner, 2008), this should suggest that the cultural injunction to understand works in tandem with a taste for the spectacular or sensational, and that one need not rule out the other. There is a pleasure in understanding, in empathizing, and occasionally that pleasure manifests itself in morbid fascination. Or, as Rousseau once put it, "Pity is such a delicious sentiment that it is not surprising one seeks to experience it" (Rousseau, 1997, p. 228).

After some other news segments about a Supreme Court ruling about "partial birth" abortion, the third section of the half-hour program involved brief interviews with family members of deceased victims. Then after an update on the Iraq war, the final segment of the program contained more footage from Cho's press kit, which Brian Williams introduced by reminding viewers that "the same warning pertains about the sensitive nature of the following," and then he simply added "here is some more of what we received of video of Cho Seung-Hui sent today to NBC." The program aired more of Cho's videos at that point, which were followed by more discussion from correspondent Pete Williams. The program ended with Brian Williams promising that NBC would air more of Cho's manifesto the next day, after law enforcement had combed through it, "because we don't want to create any more heroes or martyrs from this." As an explanation of the channel's moral or legal duties, the remarks once again fell hollow, since NBC had already done as Cho wished and broadcast his manifesto. But as a testament to the power that Williams and NBC believed the manifesto contained to inspire other potential "heroes

or martyrs," the remarks showcased an insistent belief in the power of authenticity in mass media.

Although Benjamin's use of the term aura has, as discussed in chapter one, generally been hostile to processes of reproduction, the digital character of this "manifesto" seemed to actually have enhanced its authenticity and its aura. Were some hand-written copy of a printed manifesto to have shown up in NBC's mailroom with Cho as its purported author, it would likely not have been read on the air that evening. Determining its authorship and authenticity would have been more difficult, and its less-sensational character may have marked it as less newsworthy once authorship had been confirmed. But Cho's videos and images contained not only digital stamps attesting to the times at which they were created, but more than that, they exhibited the self-produced style of webcam videos and images on social networking sites that have now become a familiar popular culture aesthetic. This new aesthetic serves the same function that the hand-held, camcorder style did beginning in the 1980s, and continues to today: a guarantor of authenticity. These technical and aesthetic considerations about the look or feel of reality create the conditions within which empathy is acceptable or appropriate. In such a context, the ease with which amateurs can create digital media allows even a disturbed, violent young person like Cho to exercise control over his media representation, creating digital artifacts that the news media will read as authentic and publicize accordingly.

When direct audio-visual evidence of the experience of tragic events is unavailable, the empathetic ideal can still work through documentation of intimate, first-person, subjective experience. One program that reflects this emphasis more than most is the Biography Channel's show *I Survived.* The program normally consists of three or four interviews, over an hour running time, with survivors of some type of near-death experiences. These experiences range

from assaults to abductions to plane crashes to wild animal attacks, and the stories are told by the survivors themselves, always seated in front of a black background, with no attempts at recreating or reenacting the events described. Instead, *I Survived* supplements its interviews only with current footage of the locations where these near-death experiences happened: an empty field where a woman was left for dead, the gas station where men and women were held hostage, the river where a family clung to a capsized boat overnight. The effect is one in which the emotional reactions of the interviewees are brought to the fore, and the audience is left to imagine themselves in the locations pictured, facing the horrible circumstances that the interviewees describe.

For the ninth episode of its first season, which began airing in 2008, *I Survived* chose two highly visible recent American catastrophes as its subjects: the Virginia Tech shootings and the collapse of a bridge on highway I-35 in Minneapolis, MN. Although three interviewees discussed the Minneapolis bridge collapse over about half of the program, the focus of this inquiry will be the other half of the show that dealt with the shootings at Virginia Tech. Three survivors of the shootings were interviewed: one student named Derek was shot in his classroom, but then helped barricade a door with other wounded students to prevent Cho from returning; another student named Colin was shot multiple times in the classroom where Cho eventually killed himself; and a professor named Ishwar hid with others in his office while the shooting took place.

The entire *I Survived* series is based on an ideal of audience empathy for survivors, and the Virginia Tech shooting segments were certainly no exception. Derek, Colin, and Ishwar all went to great lengths in their interviews to let the audience know what it felt like to be there during the massacre, both emotionally and in some cases physically. Derek described the

"repetitive sound of gunshots over and over," and how making eye contact with Cho was "one of the scariest moments of (his) life" because of the "emptiness in (Cho's) face." Colin described what it felt like to be shot in the leg and hip. The show alternated between close-ups of the survivors' faces as they told their stories and footage taken in the classrooms where the students were shot. Although this footage could have been of any empty classroom, the show labeled it "Derek's Classroom" and "Colin's Classroom" so that the audience could understand this was the real place where a real tragedy took place. Avoiding staged reenactments, *I Survived* tried to capture the lingering, haunting traces of real tragedy by filming the locations as they existed long after tragic events had taken place.

At times during the program, the interviewees added the kind of small details that only those who had truly experienced such a tragedy could provide. Derek described the way gunshot residue hung in the air, and Colin talked about hearing cell phones ringing in the pockets and backpacks of dead and wounded students lying in the classroom after the shooting. At other times, their narration resembled the kinds of terrifying scenes that could have been scripted by Hollywood screenwriters. Derek told of barricading the door with three other wounded but mobile students as Cho returned and tried to reenter the classroom by pushing the door open about six inches and firing into the space. Colin described himself wounded and defenseless, laying on the ground and trying to play dead as Cho returned to his classroom. As Colin peeked across the classroom, he watched Cho's boots while the killer methodically walked around the room shooting into the limp bodies of wounded students. These narratives allowed audiences to behave morally, by trying to understand even the mundane aspects of surviving such a harrowing ordeal, and yet still access the small vicarious thrill that came from consuming such dramatic tales.

All episodes of *I Survived* end with each interviewee explaining why they believe they survived. These answers generally take either a spiritual approach, in which god or fate is cited, or they acknowledge the survivor's own preparedness or resilience. On this episode, Colin sidestepped the question, suggesting that he too wondered why he survived and others didn't, and the third interviewee, Ishwar, discussed how hard it is for a group of people to oppose someone with automatic weapons who has "lost rationality." But Derek gave the lengthiest answer, suggesting that he survived because of "quick reactions, not only of myself, but because of my classmates, and the professors on our floor. In our classroom… teamwork definitely played a huge role in not only my survival, but maybe in the survival of other students as well." While the show did not make any suggestions about charitable giving with which the audience could have aided these and other survivors, it did offer the audience a lesson about survival, in case the audience members ever found themselves in a similar situation. This amounted to a kind of self-help for other potential victims, a way of bettering oneself through consumption similar to the consumerism of security after September 11. Contrary to the sympathetic ideal, in which spectatorship necessitates action to alleviate the *other's* suffering, the focus on empathy in *I Survived* encouraged audiences to learn from the suffering of others, to better *themselves* by simply understanding the effects of that suffering.

Of course, this combination of a therapeutic, self-help ideal with an almost voyeuristic level of intimacy is characteristic not only of *I Survived*, but of the entire genre of reality television. Given the powerful influence on popular culture that reality television exudes today, the genre itself requires a more detailed investigation. Reality television creates an empathetic way of looking, and encourages an empathetic approach to the pain and suffering of others in

general, which must be further investigated in order to understand contemporary norms concerning disaster consumption.

Reality Television and the Empathetic Gaze

As increasingly sophisticated electronic communication technologies have come to inform audiences of an ever-expanding roster of suffering others from around the world, many critics have come to doubt the effectiveness, sincerity, or simply the existence of sympathetic sentiment and action today. Postman (1985) has criticized all post-typographic media on the basis of the diminished social and political potency they engender. In his view, "by generating an abundance of irrelevant information," electronic forms of communication since the telegraph have altered the "information-action ratio" (Postman, 1985, p. 68), making it impossible for audiences to act on the myriad things of which they are informed every day.

Leaving aside questions about what kind of advances in media technology could ever avoid rupturing society's "information-action ratio," or how print technology did not also cause a similar kind of break upon its inception, many critics do echo this notion that the mass media's growing capacity and propensity to broadcast suffering and tragedy impedes public action on those issues. Though such "compassion fatigue" may or may not be a defining feature of audience response to disasters today—certainly it was not the case with the disasters discussed in this chapter—it does seem to structure the news media's approach to distant suffering, especially their coverage of stories in developing countries and other situations with little direct effect on the post-Cold War United States (Moeller, 1999). Moeller has argued that news editors, producers, and journalists tend to believe that audiences will quickly tire of any disturbing news story in a short amount of time, and consequently focus on only those crises and disasters with a highly sensational character.

Similar ideas about the public's susceptibility to sensational images of disaster, even in the face of more threatening but less eye-catching problems, have been expressed since at least the turn of the century by thinkers like the stridently anti-democratic Gustave Le Bon (1895/ 1960). In today's softer, milder psychological take on the problem, critics like E. Ann Kaplan (2005) worry about a tendency for the media's torrent of de-contextualized images of trauma to create "empty empathy" that leads to passivity and inaction. As Kaplan put it, "it is hard for pro-social motives to be aroused through mere isolated images of violence, aggression, deprivation, and death" (Kaplan, 2005). Though Susan Sontag had expressed similar sentiments in *On Photography* (1977), arguing that over time photography tended to shrivel sympathy, she later reversed that position in 2003's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, calling the idea that images inspired apathy unfair and incorrect.

In any case, this chapter argues that empathy is an ascendant structure of feeling surrounding mediated and consumed catastrophe avoids this debate to some extent. For, as has been established, empathy is an emotion specifically defined by the lack of intervention with one's object of emotional connection or identification. Thus, although sympathetic responses to the suffering of others still exist, as do pro-social responses to that suffering, the emergence of empathy as a valid, alternative moral response negates the spectator's responsibility to act. In its place, a new responsibility to engage in appropriately empathetic, vicarious interactions with distant sufferers has emerged, though this has brought renewed focus on other ethical issues and concerns.

Chief among these renewed concerns is the role of voyeurism in mass-mediated emotion. As Boltanski has noted, Enlightenment conceptions of sympathy were predicated on the spectator's "ability to see without being seen" (1999, p. 26). This position gave the spectator of

suffering tremendous panoptic power, and created the potential for voyeuristic visual pleasure within the sympathetic relationship:

> Sympathy is implicated as a particularly perverse, panopticon strategy. It is particularly perverse because its spectator is supposed to be a moral authority moved by images; but he is also like the faceless prison guard who reflects bureaucratic violence in the name of "reform." Sympathy is supposed to encourage the movement of "feeling," through vicarious affect and identification with someone else's emotion. Yet the process of vision prevents any true movement associated with "feeling." Hence, sympathy unleashes its own psychical conflict. Sympathy, even more than the figure of the panopticon, conceals the desire for and use of power through identification. Through sympathy, the aggressivity of sentiment is safely, perversely, released (Hinton, 1999, p. 16).

Hinton found that modern notions of sympathy were predicated on a sadomasochistic male gaze, as evidenced by Adam Smith's assertion that sympathy was a male-identified practice, and Hume's notion that sympathetic moral judgments rely on the spectator's experience of pleasure or discomfort.

However, sympathy's inherent injunction to act or speak out was based on precisely the possibility of this accusation: sympathy required the spectator to take some political stance in order to demonstrate that he was not taking enjoyment in the spectacle of others' suffering (Boltanski, 1999). So while this scopophilic, sadomasochistic impulse may indeed be a latent feature of Enlightenment sympathy, it is perhaps more appropriate to discuss the combination of mass-mediated emotion and visual pleasure in conjunction with the contemporary shift toward empathy. Indeed, one genre of media has emerged over the past 20 years based precisely on this combination of empathetic emotional appeals and seemingly voyeuristic viewing conditions: reality television.

Reality television is, of course, a broad term encompassing some very different kinds of programming, but certain themes and particular aesthetic techniques tend to recur in everything

from competition-based shows like *Survivor* to programs such as *Rescue 911*, which rely on retellings and reenactments of real events. Some have suggested that at least two strains of reality television exist, one based on confessional, therapeutic experiences, and the other on more sensational representations of things like crime or sexuality, and that these should be analyzed separately (see Dovey, 2000). However, both types of reality-based programming exhibit salient features of the more general consumption of disaster, and what I will call "the empathetic gaze."

Most obviously, reality television relies on a claim to "the real" that sets it apart from other genres of televised entertainment, despite the fact that much of reality programming is produced, scripted, and edited like any other fictional TV show. The documentary genre no longer has a monopoly on this claim to the real, and although many aspects of documentary-making have been absorbed within reality television, new elements have been added to the mix within our now "postdocumentary" culture of television (Corner, 2002, p. 257). These new elements reflect a shift in what is considered appropriately public and private: contemporary reality TV emphasizes individual, subjective experience, particularly when individuals have experienced some sort of trauma or tragedy "which would once have remained private but which [is] now restaged for public consumption" (Dovey, 2000, p. 21-22).

This emphasis on the reality of subjective experience in the face of misfortune suggests a crisis in the perception of reality itself. If these are the lengths that television needs to go to in order to claim access to the real, by staging and exposing "real life" suffering, then perhaps Debord (2006), Baudrillard (1994), and other scholars of spectacle and simulation are correct in asserting that reality has been lost. But as Andrejevic has pointed out, "such programming stages not the *dissolution* of the real but the inescapably *real* inadequacy of the concept of reality upon which it relies" (2004, p. 223). He argues that reality programming tends not to produce dupes

who buy into its artifice as much as savvy viewers who recognize that what they are watching is not truly real, but then consume, critique, and enjoy the programs nonetheless.

This awareness of the constructed or performative aspects of reality television extends not just to audiences, but to participants as well. Reality television actors, contestants, performers, or whatever one might call them are acutely aware that they are being filmed and watched. Oftentimes this self-awareness comes through in the idea that participants have a chance to "speak to the nation" (Dovey, 2000, p. 129); in the United States participants will often talk directly to the camera and address the audience as "America." At other times, performers enter confession booths and discuss their feelings and experiences with the camera/audience. As such, the savvy viewer takes pleasure not so much in the day-to-day performance of personality enacted by reality television participants, but in tracking the process of "selving:"

> the central process whereby "true selves" are seen to emerge (and develop) from underneath and, indeed, through, the "performed selves" projected for us, as a consequence of the applied pressures of objective circumstance and group dynamics. A certain amount of the humdrum and the routine may be a necessary element in giving this selving process, this *unwitting* disclosure of personal core, its measure of plausibility… (Corner, 2002, p. 262).

Thus, reality programming derives its truth or authenticity not solely, or even primarily, from its voyeuristic production conditions, but from the few, fleeting moments in which an authentic self is thought to emerge, almost accidentally, from the artificial or self-reflexive performances of reality TV actors. This represents the critical distinction between scripted television in general and reality television, in that normal, fictional television actors' performances would be edited to remove any break from character or revelation of the actor's true, personal core.

Of course, such unwitting disclosures of selfhood are, in fact, only made possible by the careful aesthetic and technical construction of quotidian reality that these shows rely on to establish the authenticity of the acts of selving that they eventually display. The popularity of

personal camcorders and other low-grade forms of home video has provided reality-based programming with one way of establishing such authenticity. Reality programs frequently use small hand-held cameras, or at least mimic their shaky, intimate aesthetic, in order to emphasize the presence of the audience within the subjective space of the reality TV performance (Dovey, 2000). Others use live broadcasts, or in the case of a show like *Big Brother*, provide online access to live feeds of the cast members inside the house between episodes. This "liveness" is itself a means of establishing an event's reality: "if one sees it live, one can claim status as a witness present in time if not space… liveness serves as an assurance of access to truth and authenticity" (Peters, 2001, p. 719). Reality television thus responds to viewers' and performers' acknowledgement of artifice with its own stubborn insistence on reproducing codes of spontaneity and intimacy, and this tension is in fact part of its unique form of spectatorship.

While the context of these shows is inherently voyeuristic, in practice they enact a somewhat different set of pleasures. After all, as has already been acknowledged, reality TV performers are explicitly aware of the presence of camera and audience, and the audience itself is aware of the performers' awareness. Such a viewing situation is, then, a far cry from the classical Hollywood cinema that film theorists first described as voyeuristic (see Mulvey, 1992). Metz (1992) argued that film audiences did not identify with the people on screen: "At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him" (p. 734). The viewing conditions of classical narrative cinema—an anonymous spectator in a darkened theater, and a performer who was prevented from acknowledging the presence of the camera—were thought to enact voyeuristic pleasures because spectators identified with the camera's gaze *instead* of the actor on screen (Metz, 1992). Reality television's acknowledgement of camera presence and participant performance, its emphasis on live events, and even the fact that it is generally viewed

in the family home, not anonymously in a theater, point to something other than voyeurism as a primary pleasure (Roscoe, 2001). Although such programs have explicitly voyeuristic frameworks, the gaze enacted by reality television draws out the thrill of vicarious identification with the object as well.

Reality TV's focus on the subjective experiences of the participants who are the objects of the camera's gaze marks the genre as an exercise in empathizing. Media culture is increasingly populated with "ordinary people," and reality television puts the selfhood of those people on display (Turner, 2006). When those selves are seen to suffer, it allows us to believe that their reactions are genuine, that they represent authentic responses to interactions in even the most artificially constructed reality game shows. On a wide variety of television shows, from the risqué couples retreat *Temptation Island* to the therapeutic, discussion-based *Oprah Winfrey Show*, suffering is seen as means toward personal growth and a more fully realized selfhood (Andrejevic, 2004; Illouz, 2003). In such a context, the pleasure of the spectator comes more from identifying with the subject than the gaze of the camera itself. The spectator is involved not in a relationship of voyeurism and exhibitionism, as much as engaged in a "transaction of vicarious witness and empathy" (Corner, 2002, p. 256). Participants in reality-based programming put themselves on display, experiencing what at times does appear to be genuine emotion, and audiences exercise a kind of empathy that is at times savvy or skeptical, but ultimately taken as proof of the authenticity of both audience and performer.

The spectator gains a form of pleasure from this relationship, without a doubt, and at times it skirts the edges of voyeurism or sensationalism. But since those terms have devolved into little more than epithets signifying perversion and insincerity, it has been necessary to point out the ways in which the conditions of spectatorship around reality television differ from what

is generally thought of in media studies as voyeurism, and to elaborate the ways in which motivations other than simple prurience are fundamental to these new viewing conditions.

This newly evolved set of viewing conditions, as well as the relationship between spectator and screen associated with them, constitute "the empathetic gaze." Although it emerged within the genre of reality television, as that genre gained popularity and came to have a pervasive influence across much of Western media-entertainment, the empathetic gaze has found its way into most of our mediated interactions with the suffering of others. Thus, contemporary disaster consumption has come to exhibit this empathetic gaze itself. Just as reality shows like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* used the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans as the setting for their specific brand of uplifting personal transformations (see McMurria, 2008), cable news stories and documentaries about Hurricane Katrina employed a focus on individual suffering and its transformative possibilities in ways similar to those employed in reality TV. Programs about the Virginia Tech shootings utilized similar tropes, as has already been demonstrated. The particular notions of authenticity and emotional identification at work in the empathetic gaze appear frequently in all kinds of disaster consumption. But these sorts of authenticity and identification have their limits, as a closer look at two media texts related to Hurricane Katrina will demonstrate.

Hurricane Katrina and the Limits of Empathy

While the empathetic gaze at work in disaster-related media has moved away from the standard model of voyeuristic subject and exhibitionist object, current viewing situations do still reflect and amplify certain relations of power. The empathetic gaze is not innocuous, and the ideal of identifying with and understanding the other's suffering is subject to certain limits and biases, especially concerning race and ethnicity. Those with the power to control their

positioning in front of the camera are likely to receive a more fully empathetic depiction, as even NBC's handling of Seung Hui Cho's Virginia Tech manifesto attests. On the other hand, as much Hurricane Katrina news coverage attests, the camera can also exaggerate difference and therefore impede empathetic identification. An analysis of one cable news broadcast and one documentary film about Katrina will reveal more about the limits of mass-consumed empathy.

On September 1, 2005, Anderson Cooper had been broadcasting from the Gulf Coast area for four days. Although he was unable to get into New Orleans with his crew until later, Cooper had set up live broadcasts of his *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* program from the nearby suburb of Waveland, Mississippi. The September 1 broadcast of this program exhibited just how thoroughly the empathetic ideal has permeated the news media, but also how blatantly limited that empathy can be. Of course, it is worth repeating that many Americans contributed their time and money to relief efforts in the wake of the hurricane, and the assertion that empathy is an ascendant emotional reaction to contemporary disasters should not be taken to mean that no one acts sympathetically in the wake of disasters any longer. Rather, as this chapter will show, emergent norms concerning empathy within popular culture now offer an emotional and ethical alternative to the requirements of sympathetic action.

The tone of the September 1 *Anderson Cooper 360 Degree* broadcast oscillated from a deeply emotional response to the storm, evinced by Cooper himself and many of his reporters and their interviewees, to a wildly exaggerated description of its chaotic aftermath. Although the distinction was not completely clear cut, frequently, African American hurricane victims were associated with the "chaotic" portion of this narrative, while white victims were more frequently involved in an empathetic interaction or portrayal. Although Cooper frequently blamed federal and state governments for their failure or inability to act, the frequent footage of looting and

lawlessness in New Orleans also seemed to imply that the city's African American residents were perhaps undeserving of government help.

Anderson Cooper was widely praised for his coverage of the hurricane, and specifically for two moments in this particular broadcast. In the first, Cooper angrily confronted Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu during an interview with her, as she appeared via remote broadcast from Baton Rouge. Cooper started by asking Landrieu if the federal government was responsible and should apologize to the people of the Gulf Coast. Landrieu immediately began to sidestep the question, offering thanks to former presidents Bush and Clinton for their words of support, and Senators Frist and Reid, before Cooper interrupted, telling Landrieu that:

> for the last four days, I've been seeing dead bodies in the streets here in Mississippi. And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other, you know, I've got to tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated. And when they hear politicians slap—you know, thanking one another, it just, you know, it kind of cuts them the wrong way right now, because literally there was a body on the streets of this town yesterday being eaten by rats because this woman had been laying in the street for 48 hours. And there's not enough facilities to take her up. Do you get the anger that is out here?

Interestingly, although the interview began with a question about the material inadequacy of the government's response, the substance of Cooper's anger at Landrieu involved the emotional inadequacy of her personal response, which he felt did not reflect the gravity of the situation and was insufficiently sensitive to the suffering of those on the ground—including himself. The visual elements of the exchange reflected this imbalance of empathy as well. While Landrieu was thanking politicians, CNN cut to aerial shots of flooded swampland and overturned boats, then back to the Senator on dry ground in front of a government building with people leisurely talking in groups behind her and SUVs driving in and out of frame. In contrast to the pristinely

made-up Landrieu, Cooper was filmed with his sleeves rolled up, in front of a giant pile of debris and wooden planks that used to be houses.

Later in the program, Cooper offered himself as an example of a properly empathetic emotional response to such suffering. The show broadcast footage of a family in a pickup truck, parked in front of piles of wooden beams, an overturned boat, and other debris, while the white men and girls in the back of the truck held up a torn and muddy American flag for the camera. The camera cut back to Cooper, who began to explain the footage in very emotional, therapeutic terms, stating that "we are seeing things like this, just an outpouring of love and care for, uh, for people in this community, and people in this community are helping one another, and standing by one another. There has been some looting, yeah, but uh, but uh, well…" At that point, Cooper appeared to wave to the people in the truck who were off-camera, then tried to resume speaking, with an obvious lump in his throat. His voice cracked as he sputtered out another "um," then he paused and looked away from the camera for three or four seconds of dead air as he tried to compose himself while clearly fighting off tears. Excusing himself to the audience for his emotional outburst with a quick "sorry," he preceded then to the next segment.

This moment of dead-air and choked emotion had a big impact on audiences and media critics alike. During this first week of hurricane coverage, viewership of *AC 360* increased 400% (Van Meter, 2005). Cooper was hailed for his empathy, for allowing viewers a peak behind the news anchor veneer to his genuine humanity. Even before the hurricane, Cooper had been regarded as a new breed of "emo-anchor," an exemplar of "a reality TV 'authenticity,' with human dimensions, rather than the stentorian, scripted authority of the network era" (Hagan, 2005, para. 11). But his reaction to the suffering of Hurricane Katrina's victims cemented that position, and seemed to confirm a shift in expectations about the emotional responses of the

news media to tragic events. As one commentator put it, "not long ago, television was a no-cry zone. The top newsmen were celebrated for their emotional control in the face of gut-punching developments. War, death, terrorism, plague—nothing rattled their composure… These days, everywhere you look you see anchors seemingly on the verge of losing their composure" (Gillette, 2009, para. 2, 9). Though a television anchor like Walter Cronkite famously choked up when announcing President Kennedy's death, he later expressed regret, explaining that his momentary loss of composure had been inappropriate for a news anchor (Lloyd, 2009). Cooper and the new generation of emotional cable news personalities like him are largely unrepentant about their on-air displays of emotion (Van Meter, 2005; Gillette, 2009).

But there are limitations to this kind of on-air empathy. Cooper's broadcast crew were stationed in the predominantly white suburb of Waveland, Mississippi, and the anchor's personal interactions with others took place there, including his coverage of a husband and wife returning to find that their home was little more than a pile of wreckage. As the wife picked out photos and other possessions from the rubble in the background, Cooper intoned that "reporters are supposed to remain distant observers. There is no distance in Waveland anymore." Such a statement, especially as CNN's cameras focused uncomfortably closely on this sobbing woman kneeling in the littered debris that was her home, served to excuse that kind of overly intimate coverage of the suffering of others. After all, audiences saw how moved Cooper had been by the devastation in Waveland and the resilience of its residents, and he had expressed their anger to Senator Landrieu: clearly he had their best interests in mind. But even if emotionally identifying with the people of Waveland did not fully justify the public broadcasting of their suffering, it seemed to forestall identification with slightly more distant others.

Despite Cooper's attempts to extend the reach of his empathy to the predominantly African-American residents of New Orleans, many of the segments that focused on the city and its residents were filled with stereotypes about looting and chaos. There were as many examples of "othering" as empathizing, and this fear of violence and lawlessness loomed large over the entire broadcast. Perhaps because the network lacked enough footage of this sort of behavior to match the frequency with which the topic was discussed, at least four different video clips containing antisocial behavior or violence in New Orleans were broadcast more than once during this hour-long program. The need to replay these same images of inner-city chaos should have clued producers in to the potentially overstated quality of this threat, but it did not. Instead, voice-over narration reframed the reused footage without acknowledging its previous context. For instance, one shot of a man with his back to the camera drawing a gun on an apparent looter was broadcast in black and white at the beginning of the program as the narrator declared "shop owners armed and dangerous." Later, when the same footage was broadcast in color, it became apparent that the gunman was a law enforcement officer, not a shopkeeper, and the footage was part of a segment on lawmen "restoring order." In both cases, the image portrayed an African American, who may or may not have actually been engaged in illegal activity, as a kind of inhuman or stereotypical other, the target of a defensive shopkeeper or a courageous police officer, not a victim himself of the larger circumstances surrounding the hurricane and its aftermath.

Perhaps the most egregious form of racial othering on this broadcast came from a series of images of a black man attempting to break into a store. The footage showed a young, shirtless man with his back to the camera repeatedly swinging a metal baseball bat into the glass door of what appeared to be an upscale store or bank. In many ways this young man epitomized the type

of African American male who scares mainstream white America, with his dark skin and muscular frame, and his low-hanging, baggy jeans exposing the top of his buttocks. As if the subtext about this stereotypical image needed emphasizing, the voice-over during these images did not describe this particular man's story, or even talk about looting in conjunction with this image. Instead, CNN's Chris Lawrence reported that "Some women were walking by. The police officers told them—ordered them, in fact—that they could not go down one particular street, told them that there have been groups of young men going around, shooting people, attempting to rape women, and ordered them to continue walking in the other direction." The fact that the image of this man's violent—though ultimately unsuccessful—attempt to break into a store was accompanied by an anecdote about the threat of rape suggests, once again, that New Orleans' African American population was subject to frequent stereotyping, almost as a counterweight to the hyper-empathetic coverage of whites in Waveland.

Of course, there were many moments of pathos exhibited by black New Orleans residents during the program, and some very humane, empathetic representations of those residents during the course of the show. One man, interviewed at the start of the program moments after he had disembarked from a bus in Houston that had picked him up from the Superdome, described in a voice fraught with tension: "I'm just disgusted right now. My head is killing me. I'm just stressed out right now. I'm tired. I need a bed. I need a bath. I'm just overdue, for everything." The man spoke with the camera in a close-up shot of his face the entire time, his palpably fragile emotional state a testament to the toll that the storm had taken on New Orleans' evacuees.

But CNN's Adori Udoji immediately followed that footage up by mentioning lawlessness and looting, using the oft-repeated, if unsubstantiated, claim that "some took only what they needed to survive, others took whatever they could: appliances, clothes, guns." The footage that

accompanied this claim involved African Americans walking into and out of a closed Walgreens pharmacy. The first woman caught on camera covered her face as she exited with apparently looted groceries, including a package of Huggies-brand diapers. Real pathos could have been found in that image as well, and the reporter could have urged the audience to imagine the conditions that would drive this woman, clearly uncomfortable with her decision, to have to steal diapers in the middle of a flooded, dangerous city. But the image was instead presented as little more than a virtual "perp walk" for this woman; not a means to elicit fellow-feeling, but an impediment to audience identification and empathy.

Thus, it is fairly easy to conclude that the empathetic ideal in Cooper's news coverage did not extend equally to all demographics of storm victims. Though this may have been a function of the difficulty of reporting from New Orleans-proper at that time, it was nonetheless reflected in the imbalance with which blacks and whites were portrayed as empathetic victims. Though empathy sometimes extended to black victims, shown waiting desperately at the Superdome or begging the government on-camera for help, it always extended to the white residents of Waveland, even occasionally transforming into acts of sympathetic aid. Twice the program offered a white hurricane survivor the chance to say his name and have his picture on camera in order to let his family and friends know that he was safe. No similar announcements were made by non-white survivors. The show also told the story of Tad and Helena Breux, a white couple who had been trying to track down their baby, who had been left in an evacuating New Orleans hospital. With the help of media outlets, including CNN, they were able to locate their infant son and were about to go to Fort Worth, Texas to pick him up when they appeared on *AC 360*. Again, no non-white couple appeared to receive a similar level of assistance from the show or network. While this may be due to the logistics of producing a news program outside of a major

city in which normal lines of communication have been disrupted, the over-reliance on whites for the most in-depth, humane coverage in this broadcast served to magnify the stereotypical representations of non-whites, especially African Americans.

The empathetic ideal requires the spectator to emotionally identify with an unfortunate, but the representation of that sufferer is highly susceptible to racial stereotyping and othering. The same can probably be said for audiences themselves, who bring their own class, racial, and political biases to the viewing situation. Classical expressions of sympathy were, at least in theory, free from such problems, in that they required the sympathetic spectator to prove his emotional commitment was based only on rational consideration for the suffering of another. A valid commitment had to "be purely *moral*, that is to say free from any determination by interests and consequently from any prior communal ties" (Boltanski, 1999, p. 31). Such morality had to be established "without recourse to notions of tribal solidarity or emotional community" (Boltanski, 1999, p. 38). The same cannot be said of the contemporary empathetic ideal; the kind of vicarious, intersubjective emotional bond that constitutes this ideal appears vulnerable to a variety of prejudices.

One might wonder, however, what the story of Hurricane Katrina and its poor, African American victims would look like when told by one of those victims, and whether different processes of emotional expression and audience identification might be at work. One media text that explored this theme was 2008's *Trouble the Water*; it told the story of Kimberly Roberts, a 24-year-old aspiring hip-hop artist who rode out the storm in her Lower Ninth Ward house with her husband Scott and their neighbors. Although the film was directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, collaborators of Michael Moore's who had come to New Orleans to do a story on the Louisiana National Guard's return from Iraq to their flooded hometown, much of the film was

comprised of Roberts' own camcorder footage of her neighborhood and her experiences before, during, and after the storm. Upon meeting up with Lessin and Deal, in addition to being filmed by their crew, Roberts continued to record her life on a camcorder, as she and her husband tried to reconnect with family and friends and begin a new life.

At film festivals, during its limited theatrical release, and when it was broadcast on the HBO network, the film received a host of positive reviews, many of which made specific reference to the film's capacity to expand the empathic capacity of its audience. As one reviewer put it, "No human being I can imagine could watch 'Trouble the Water' and not be overwhelmed by grief and joy, and humbled by one's sudden awareness of one's own prejudices about the lives, passions and dreams of poor people. George W. Bush would weep buckets at this movie" (O'Hehir, 2008, para. 7). It is not hard to understand why critics found *Trouble the Water* so emotionally resonant. The film contained numerous acts of heroism: Kim offered food and shelter to neighbors in her flooded house's attic, she videotaped her neighbor Larry ferrying stranded people back and forth between houses using a punching bag as a flotation device, and she commandeered an unused truck with her husband and neighbors and drove everyone out of the city after four days stranded there. It also exhibited the harsh and often maddening realities of post-Katrina New Orleans, specifically the bureaucratic indifference with which the local and federal authorities handled the storm's poorest victims. In one scene, Kim, Scott, and a friend named Brian returned to Kim's uncle's house in New Orleans and found his corpse there, despite the fact that search and rescue teams had already marked the house as having no bodies inside. Later in the film, Kim's brother told of being abandoned in a New Orleans prison, as guards evacuated without explaining to the prisoners what was happening and without providing any

food or water. The grandmother who raised Kim also died during Katrina in a New Orleans hospital, and the film briefly recorded the funeral.

Certainly, through all of this, there were many moments of emotional expression that felt natural, even though they were captured on camera, and which seemed likely to inspire empathetic audience responses. Some of these were small moments: after Kim and Scott drove their fellow refugees out of the city, one of the elderly neighbors thanked Kim for saving her life, and Kim's sheepish, almost embarrassed grin proved revealing and heartwarming. Others were focal points of the film: when Kim's cousin met her at her temporary residence in Memphis, Tennessee while playing the only surviving copy of her music on his car stereo, her unbridled joy appeared unscripted and completely genuine. It also led to perhaps the most iconic moment in the film, in which Kim rapped along to a song she wrote and recorded about her life and the obstacles that she had faced and overcome.

But that moment also exposed some of the film's weaknesses, and some shortcomings of the empathetic gaze in general. Throughout the film, one could not escape the feeling that one already knew the outcome. Paradoxically in the case of such a major disaster, the audience understood from the outset that the story would be a tale of overcoming and perseverance, of forging a better self through adversity and suffering. While such narratives have perhaps always had their appeal, the merger of psycho-therapeutic ideas with popular entertainment in formats like television talk shows has made them more commonplace (Illouz, 2003). Not only have audiences come to expect this theme, but in this case, the film's subject seemed hyper-aware of the potential public interest in the footage before Hurricane Katrina had even hit. Early in the film, when she took her camera into a small grocery store to record people stocking up for the storm, she declared, "This is a little doc I'm doing, just in case it's all gone, I got it all on tape.

See, I'm showing the world that we did have a world, before the storm came." Her almost eerily prescient comment there was followed by a later discussion with some neighbors of the more explicitly promotional possibilities of her recording. "If I get some exciting shit," she joked, "I might gonna send it to them white folks, ya heard!" And indeed, at the start of the film the audience was shown footage of Kim and Scott approaching the filmmakers and promoting the footage that she had collected. She told them that "this needs to be worldwide. All the footage I've seen on TV, nobody ain't got what I got. I got right there in the hurricane!"

Of course, this is not to cast aspersions on Kim, her husband, or the documentary filmmakers with whom she created *Trouble the Water*. Her actions during and after Katrina were indeed heroic, and her desire to promote herself and her fledging music career using the footage of those actions was certainly no different than the motives of any of the thousands of reality television contestants, though her story was far more compelling. But that is also part of the problem. In the end, while the film was highly critical of the government's response to the hurricane, its need to graft the standard narrative of overcoming and perseverance onto Kim's life story felt not necessarily forced, but somewhat cliché. Forced is definitely not the right word, because Kim was very aware of this standard interpretation of suffering as the key to building a better self, and emphasized it throughout the film. Discussing her impending move to Memphis, she stated that she planned to

> Go out there, start my music career, find me a church where I can go worship. I'm already at the bottom, I can't go down, I can't do nothing but go up. Hope I can put this hurricane stuff behind me, but if not I'm ready to face them head on, nose to nose, neck to neck too. It don't matter to me, but at least I'm trying to do something different, trying to, you know, trying. When you try, you know, you get results, so I'm trying to better my life.

Her husband Scott expressed a similar desire to start his life over, to "see how it is to do it right from the beginning," and Kim explained how she was refusing to let her fear about the move

control her. While these were laudable sentiments, they didn't sound that different from the concluding remarks of reality show contestants on even tawdry shows such as *Temptation Island*. One such contestant, whose long-term relationship was almost ruined because of his behavior on that show, put it thusly: "Every time I made a choice, I made the difficult choice because I knew that would be the way of growing and that would be my way of learning about myself and becoming who I am and learning about my individuality" (quoted in Andrejevic, 2004, p. 192). In both cases, suffering was seen as an opportunity for personal growth.

However, if such giant catastrophes as Hurricane Katrina end up boiling down simply to opportunities for their victims' self-improvement, then certainly the onus is no longer on spectators to take sympathetic action in the catastrophes' wakes. Rather, the emotional work of empathizing with suffering others as they attempt to better themselves is proof enough of one's moral worth, and is also a chance to improve oneself vicariously in the process. At the end of the film, Kim was shown working on a song in a music studio, and her husband was seen enjoying his new job doing construction work. Both were back in New Orleans, seemingly better for the experience. By displaying these two disaster victims as actually empowered and improved by the experience, the film established the vicarious consumption of suffering as the audience-member's only moral requirement, and a means towards his or her own self-improvement as well.

Thus, the empathetic ideal drains disaster of its political potential. Though anger at the government's inept response to Hurricane Katrina was certainly a big part of the emotional response to *Trouble the Water* and *AC 360*, that anger in and of itself was not political. The process of translating emotional identification with a suffering unfortunate into an active critique of the social, economic, or governmental forces behind that suffering, and of making

compensatory demands on the responsible parties, exemplifies classical notions of sympathy within a robust public sphere. But the conditions for such a sympathetic public sphere are challenged by the alternative of an empathetic, consumerist style of apprehending the suffering of others, and the potentials for racial and class bias in that purely emotional form of identification. News stories in a consumer society, even ones as monumental as Hurricane Katrina, have a shelf life; they get consumed and quickly lose their appeal. Eight months after the hurricane, news coverage of the painstakingly slow reconstruction of New Orleans had dissipated, due supposedly to audiences' and producers' "Katrina fatigue" (Kurtz, 2006). Even Anderson Cooper was criticized for CNN's seeming abandonment of the story he himself promised not to give up on, in a June 21, 2006 interview on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The deeply empathetic response to the suffering caused by Katrina could not outlast the speed of contemporary news cycles, and seemed less than a year later to have made little difference in on-the-ground reconstruction efforts.

Conclusion

In some ways, Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings were very different kinds of catastrophes. In terms of the loss of life and property, and their immediate political implications, the two events varied greatly. The government's inadequate response to Katrina was regarded by many as a referendum on the Bush presidency, and on the persistence of racial inequality in urban America, while the Virginia Tech shootings prompted a brief "advocacy free-for-all" (Furedi, 2007) that resulted in little public consensus, and which never fully escaped the familiar media frameworks adopted after the 1999 Columbine shooting. Even the news broadcasts and documentary films discussed in this chapter have vast differences. The anchors of the two news broadcasts, Brian Williams and Anderson Cooper, have very different emotional

styles that were reflected in their news coverage. And the purposefully somber narratives delivered by Virginia Tech shooting victims on *I Survived* varied greatly from the eyewitness camcorder footage and occasional self-promotional exuberance of *Trouble the Water*. Yet the mass consumption of both disasters, as reflected in all four of the media texts examined here, exhibited certain common themes.

Although the empathetic ideal encourages emotional identification with the people on screen, it requires some guarantee of the genuineness or authenticity of what one is watching. In the programs discussed in this chapter, such guarantees were based on a combination of the technical or aesthetic qualities of the media at hand and the personal self-performances of those on-screen. The technical qualities of the slightly shaky and grainy footage of stranded, grief-stricken, or frightened Katrina victims lent added weight to their emotional testimonies on camera. When the broadcast lacked any traces of this aesthetic, as in the footage of Anderson Cooper anchoring the live broadcast from Waveland, Cooper painted himself as a fellow sufferer of the storm by losing his composure on camera. Kim Robert's camcorder footage from the eye of the storm served a similar function: it cemented her identity as a compassionate, heroic, and authentic storm survivor and propelled that status through the long, post-hurricane portion of the film where the camera quality improved and outside filmmakers got involved.

When no live disaster footage was available, as in the *I Survived* episode dedicated to the Virginia Tech shootings, an intense focus on the personal experience of the victims sufficed as an assurance of authenticity. That program eschewed the use of recycled news footage and reenactments of dramatic events, and even edited the interviewer completely out of the traumatic narratives relayed by the shooting's survivors, in order to focus intently on the interviewees' intimate, personal performances of trauma and grief. On the other hand, the episode of *NBC*

Nightly News with Brian Williams containing Cho's multi-media manifesto attested, once again, to the incredible power of first-person disaster footage; though in this case the person in question was actually the cause of the disaster. American consumer culture venerates such footage of the tragic or disastrous precisely because it is thought to be more authentic than the rest of the media landscape, and in this case Cho's authorship of the images imbued them with an appeal akin to Benjamin's notion of the aura. This aura attracted Brian Williams and NBC's producers enough for them to ignore the public outrage that airing such controversial documents was bound to, and did, stir up. But the empathetic ideal extended to Cho too, as Williams and his guests led the audience through Cho's words and images on a search for psychological clues to the killer's mindset and motivation.

Film theory has long established the potential of cinema's projection technologies and viewing conditions to create audience identification with the camera's objectifying gaze. More recently, scholars of reality television have described the different kinds of audience identification associated with that genre of entertainment. This chapter has suggested that a kind of empathetic gaze, derived in part from the ways of seeing associated with reality television, is embedded in the four media texts analyzed here, and the consumption of disaster more generally. This gaze involves a particular way of looking at and identifying with the subjective experiences of those on whom the camera's gaze is fixed. Rather than the detached, voyeuristic gaze of Hollywood cinema, the empathetic gaze elicits the spectator's vicarious emotional connection to the subject on screen, and is especially prominent when that subject has been shown to suffer. In a culture that greatly esteems the ability to empathize with one's lovers, family members, or co-workers, the emotional work of empathizing with on-screen suffering is itself a pleasurable aspect of the viewing experience called forth by the empathetic gaze.

In stark contrast to the ideal of sympathy, which involves acting, or at least speaking out, on behalf of those who suffer, this mediated empathy is more about self-improvement than improving the condition of unfortunates. In that way, the empathetic gaze meshes well with other forms of mass consumption such as the purchasing of t-shirts, athletic apparel, cds, or toy bears. While much of the proceeds from these kinds of purchases have gone to relief efforts for victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, such purchases also serve to mark consumers as emotionally sensitive individuals who care about the fate of others. The positive impact on one's own identity of such seemingly altruistic behavior is a motivating factor even for people who volunteer directly (Hayes, 2004; McMurria, 2008). Rather than reawakening the longstanding debate over the possibility of truly altruistic behavior (see Piliavin, 2008), the consumption of disaster mitigates the tension between egotistic and altruistic actions, suggesting that empathetically motivated consumption is in and of itself a moral action, regardless of its limited or non-existent effect on the conditions of those who suffer. This ideal also works in tandem with contemporary pop-psychological attitudes that suffering and victimhood can always be transformed by victims themselves into opportunities for self-improvement and renewal.

Of course, this sort of consumption-oriented empathy for distant others has its limits and lacunae. Basing one's fellow-feeling for distant others on how identifiable one finds them leaves the entire empathetic process vulnerable to personal biases. The fact that looped, often out-of-context footage of African-American looters co-existed on *AC 360* with a segment in which the news anchor was close to openly weeping at the site of a truckload of white hurricane victims suggests no less. One study even found that whites who strongly identified with their own racial group heavily biased their charitable giving against black hurricane victims (Fong & Luttmer, 2007). In this sense, Enlightenment notions of sympathy that disqualified communal, familial, or

ethnic considerations in favor of a more rational, objective consideration of others' suffering are superior to the empathetic ideal, at least in theory. Of course in practice, these same racial biases, as well as class and gender prejudices, likely rendered many unfortunate sufferers invisible to classical advocates of sympathy such as Smith and Hume.

More than simply racial biases then, the empathetic gaze is vulnerable to the larger paradoxes of authenticity. If one is to properly identify with the suffering of others, one must first be assured that their suffering is genuine; but unlike the rational consideration of claims to victimhood associated with sympathy, this empathetic ideal rests on the spectator's evaluation of the subjective authenticity of the other's suffering. Although skillfully presented personal narratives like those on *I Survived* are often enough to guarantee that the subjects' emotions are genuine, first-person footage and live broadcasting from disaster zones are more effective—the aesthetic and technological cues associated with these scenarios transform the authenticity of unfortunates from a question into a given.

The results, however, are a ceaseless quest for increasingly intimate footage of suffering; an increasing number of reporters on the scene as a disaster unfolds; and mounting pressure to broadcast traumatic images, regardless of who produced them or what their broadcast might mean for victims or potential imitators. But, of course, authenticity is never fully achieved, coverage could always be timelier and more intimate, and more than that, the drive for increasingly authentic disaster-related artifacts and experiences is, itself, inauthentic. Throwing a camera in the face of a shocked Virginia Tech student moments after the shootings or following a Waveland homeowner as she combs through the rubble of her house may generate a certain kind of intimacy, but it can also appear craven and obvious: inauthentic despite itself. The only thing certain in the quest for such a fleeting phenomenon as authenticity is that it will continue to

rely on the raw materials of tragedy and disaster, mining the ores of real emotion that such harrowing events contain.

Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to call contemporary disaster consumption voyeuristic. The contemporary emphasis on empathy means that spectators of suffering are less likely to objectify the on-screen sufferer and more likely to identify with him or her. It is similarly unfair to call such consumption immoral; instead, one might more accurately suggest that alternative moral and normative codes concerning the suffering of others have emerged that actually encourage ethical consumers to engage in an empathetic form of spectatorship. Such an understanding recasts the consumers of disaster from voyeuristic spectators to concerned, ethical bystanders. But the empathetic ideal does serve to neutralize the political potential of disasters. If, in the face of mass destruction, one is only asked to empathize with the victims, then even the most widespread anger, outrage, and sorrow will likely never motivate any political act more involved than the purchase of a t-shirt whose proceeds go to charity.

This discontinuity between actual aid and emotional connection was perhaps best reflected in a moment on *AC 360*, when a CNN reporter who had grown up in Waveland talked with Anderson Cooper about her own emotional response to the devastation there. The reporter, Kathleen Koch, commented that the lack of resources for survivors made her "want to throw down my microphone and just take all the water that we have in our vehicle and give it to them and start driving up and down the streets," a sentiment with which Cooper appeared to agree. But of course, neither Koch nor Cooper dropped what they were doing and gave away all their water, nor had they planned to. It is particularly indicative of the contemporary cultural moment that Koch's failure to follow through on her desire to help was not seen as an indictment, yet her expression of the emotional urge to do so was presented as laudatory in and of itself. In such a

context, disaster victims can expect powerful, widespread public support for their recoveries, but that will likely mean emotional support, and psychological recovery. The emergence of the empathetic gaze in the wake of disasters leaves us no closer to positive material, social, or political change.

Chapter Four

Prosuming History: Identity, Therapy, and Memory

Introduction

A recent CNN.com article told the story of Judson Box, a man whose firefighter son, Gary, had died in the attacks of September 11. Buoyed by their daughter's 2009 visit to the National 9/11 Museum's Tribute Center, Mr. Box and his wife Helen spent hours scouring images available at the Museum and those directly uploaded by users on the Museum's website. They hoped to find an image of Gary and learn more about what he had done that day and how he had died. The Boxes eventually did find a photo online, taken by a Danish businessman who had been stranded in traffic in the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. It showed their son rushing on foot through the tunnel from Brooklyn to Manhattan, since his company's fire truck could not get through the traffic. Mr. Box described his reaction to the photo as "out of control, emotionally… Thanking God, being so happy that I had something to see" (Solomon, 2010, para. 10). Since finding the photo and eventually meeting the photographer during a fundraiser, Judson Box has helped promote the National 9/11 Museum because, in his words, "too many people forget" (Solomon, 2010, para. 21).

Thanks to this relatively new form of online commemoration and archiving, the Box family was provided with the comfort of a new image of their son, and a new understanding of his last day on earth, nine years after his passing. As this story illustrates, the Internet is changing the way that society stores information and relates to the past. Of course, collective memory has always been constituted through the development of "mnemonic technologies" used to extend

social capacities for storage and recollection beyond those of the individual human brain (Olick, 1999, p. 342). From the "arts of memory" associated with medieval storytellers, to the nineteenth-century creation of museums and archives in Europe, to more recent developments in broadcast media, technologies of information collection and communication have helped shape and shift the ways in which societies remember (Olick, 1999). Yet there are distinctive features of new online forms of commemoration that require further investigation.

A wide variety of websites exist today that are devoted to the exercise of collective memory and the creation of memorials devoted to tragic or catastrophic events. In addition to the online component of the National 9/11 Museum, the September 11 attacks have been commemorated and memorialized online in a number of other websites, as has another recent American disaster, Hurricane Katrina. This article focuses on two online archives devoted to these disasters, the September 11 Digital Archive (http://911digitalarchive.org/) and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (http://hurricanearchive.org/), in order to examine the kinds of meaning created for, and by, contributors to these new online sites of commemoration.

Digital archives and memory banks are online databases that allow users to upload images, music files, links, news items, and personal messages or stories to a collection that other users may then browse or search. Though the roots of such databases predate the September 11 attacks, a software platform developed by the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University has been used since 2001 to create digital memory banks for many historical events, from the attacks of September 11, to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, to the Virginia Tech shootings, among others. The architecture of these memory banks seeks to "embody the relationships of participatory cultures and communal memories that are being constructed through next-generation Internet technologies such as Second Life, blogs, wikis, and

social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace" (Jesiek & Hunsinger, 2008, p. 193). Although the objects in these memorials are not re-writable in the same vein as Wikipedia entries, some memory banks allow users to add tags to existing items, and memory bank developers are currently exploring new possibilities for added interactivity in future iterations (Ibid.).

This chapter examines the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank as forms of *prosumption*, because the users who produce and upload content to these sites are also the consumers of the sites. By analyzing the stories and messages uploaded to these two digital archives, this article attempts to better understand the meanings of online commemoration for those who engage in it, and the ways in which prosumption reflects, reinforces, and at times contradicts those meanings. As the chapter demonstrates, the messages and stories left at these sites frequently feature claims about emotions, trauma, and healing—in short, they reflect a therapeutic ideal in which the restoration of one's mental health after a tragic or difficult event is of paramount importance.

Though this therapeutic ideal has been a salient feature of American culture for a century by some accounts (see Moskowitz, 2001), it has only emerged as a goal of commemoration and collective memory in the last 30 years (Savage, 2006). The contemporary convergence of therapeutic principles with new forms of online collective memory accounts for the power of digital archives today, as exemplified by the Box family's experience. However, their story is also in many ways exceptional, and the everyday uses of online memory banks rarely feature such dramatic ends. Instead, the sort of therapeutic experience on offer at the digital memory banks studied in this chapter was primarily one of self-help, which is a form of prosumption in and of itself. Thus, what one views at digital archives and memory banks is the convergence of

three separate phenomena that blur the lines between production and consumption: the creation of spontaneous or vernacular memorials in the physical landscape, the practice of therapeutic self-help, and the use of new, interactive, online media.

These three forms of prosumption each draw much of their appeal from the perception that they are more authentic than official or traditional forms. Spontaneous shrines, therapeutic self-help, and user-generated digital media all reflect the value placed on unique, original, or authentic experiences in contemporary culture, even or especially when such experiences involve pain or loss. Spontaneous and vernacular forms of commemoration, usually at the sites of tragic events, are seen as offering "authentic encounter(s)" that are "not commercialized or mass-mediated" (Wojcik, 2008, p. 234).

> The desire for visceral experience, for intensified modes of sensation that may permit empathetic response, encourage ideological attachment and, especially, confirm our own reality, draws people to these sites of tragic death. Some deem this disrespectful… Yet it is also, increasingly, the subjective, personal, and hence 'authentic' kind of ritualistic performance out of which Americans (among others) make meaning of tragic death and traumatic loss (Doss, 2008, p. 134).

These commemorative rituals create a kind of empathic, therapeutic experience for those who participate, and such therapeutic experiences are typically seen as exercises in the realization of one's own authentic self (Illouz, 2008). In the case of digital archives, this sense of personal authenticity is bolstered by the fact that the messages and stories one reads there have presumably been posted by "average" people not unlike oneself, rather than politicians or members of the news or entertainment media. Such online aggregations of user-generated content tend, even in fairly commercial contexts, to radiate a sense of "participation, ideological sincerity, and authenticity" (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Jensen Schau, 2008, p. 352). Thus, at these digital archives, one may confirm one's own personal authenticity by reading the

unmediated reflections of others on an American tragedy, as well as by contributing one's own thoughts and feelings for posterity.

This chapter explores the ways in which the convergence of vernacular commemoration, therapeutic ideals, and web-based, digital technology manifests in the messages submitted to digital archives. It analyzes the most frequently recurring themes in the user-generated contributions to these sites and seeks to identify what types of people submitted them, as well as to determine what purposes motivated their submissions. Doing so raises questions about the role of national identity in one's choice of commemorative activity, as well as the limits of empathetic identification with suffering others, especially in terms of what one chooses to remember or, perhaps, to forget. The prosumption that occurs at digital memory banks offers the possibility of a cathartic or otherwise therapeutic form of shared recollection, but its potential to inspire healing or positive change is geared more towards the individuals who submit to these archives themselves than to the larger communities actually affected by these disasters. As such, it is worth considering not only how notions of authenticity play into the individualistic forms of commemoration on offer at these digital archives, but also what these forms of commemoration say about our understanding of authenticity itself.

Prosumption and Self-help

Visitors who submit messages to digital memory banks may be described as *prosumers*. Like other forms of online activity associated with the phenomenon commonly described as *Web 2.0*, in which websites offer users a platform or framework that they can add to or modify, contributing to a digital memory bank is simultaneously a form of production and consumption. The consumption of these online archives and memory banks constitutes a form of production as well, because users frequently add their own stories, submit files, add links, tag existing content,

or even simply search through the database as a means of customizing their own experiences. Today, an ever-growing number and variety of websites are devoted to various forms of user participation and information exchange (Beer & Burrows, 2010).

The ramifications of these interactive, participatory forms of online prosumption remain hotly debated. Their advantages over older models of web portals, which simply presented visitors with a one-way flow of information, are in some ways obvious. Today, social networking sites, blogs, and wikis can create new communities scattered over wide geographical areas (Feenberg, 2009), supplement face-to-face interaction and increase participation in voluntary organizations (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001), and provide a more reflexive, open, and democratic alternative to older forms of journalism (Goode, 2009), to name but a few benefits. However, many view this incorporation of consumers into the production process as simply an advanced form of exploitation. The popularity of open-source software, online product reviews, and so-called *citizen journalism* does not change the fact that today "consumers do these formerly paid tasks for no recompense" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 26). Contemporary capitalism has sought to increase the rate of innovation and invention by drawing consumers more fully into the process (Thrift, 2006), and these consumers generally receive little economic reward for their work beyond the simple pleasures of co-creation itself or the benefits when products and services are improved as a result.

But the blurring of consumption and production far predates the computer or the Internet. Alvin Toffler, who coined the term *prosumption* (1980), has pointed out that the ascendance of market economies during the Industrial Revolution cleaved productive work from consumption, and that before then most economic activity consisted of a kind of "production for self-use" (Toffler, 1980, p. 295) similar to contemporary forms of prosumption. One of Toffler's earliest

examples of modern prosumption involved the growth of self-care and self-help in the 1970s. With the appearance on the market of home pregnancy tests and blood pressure kits, and then the increasing popularity of bereavement groups and twelve-step programs, millions of people began to perform services for themselves that would previously have been performed for them by a doctor—in other words, they began actively prosuming their own physical and mental healthcare.

As Toffler explained, such self-help groups especially "rely entirely on what might be termed 'cross-counseling'—people swapping advice based on their own life experience, as distinct from receiving traditional counseling from the professionals" (Toffler, 1980, p. 285). This is similar in some ways to what happens today at digital memory banks, in which one user's message of hope or consolation might be read by a victim's family member, and perhaps responded to in kind. These kinds of therapeutic dialogues between non-experts are exceedingly common today in a media culture filled with self-help chat rooms and television talk shows focused on the public disclosure of one's psychic pain (Illouz, 2003; Moskowitz, 2001; Song, 2004).

In fact, although the optimism of the early self-help movement was initially seen as incompatible with Freud's pessimistic notion of the psyche, the convergence of Freudian psychology and the self-help ethos in American culture today was made possible precisely "because the language of psychotherapy left the realm of experts and moved to the realm of popular culture" (Illouz, 2008, p. 155). This new language converted large numbers of Americans to what Moskowitz (2001) has called "the therapeutic gospel," in which personal happiness and self-fulfillment are primary goals, and unhappiness is a condition that can and should be treated. While the therapeutic assertion that one must make or remake oneself into a

happier, more fulfilled person certainly reinforces the power and prestige of professional counselors and psychotherapists, it also serves as a powerful motivator for many forms of prosumption. By taking one's physical, mental, or spiritual health into one's own hands, one has already adopted the active stance of the prosumer. In this sense, digital memory banks showcase a further intertwining of the ideals of therapeutic self-help with newer forms of online prosumption.

Spontaneous Commemoration and Therapeutic Monuments

The Internet is not the only place where prosumption and collective memory intertwine, however. Some of these same cultural trends towards consumption for self-use and the active participation of non-experts have been at work in commemorative efforts in the physical landscape for at least 30 years. As such, the growing preponderance of spontaneous shrines and the contemporary mandate for therapeutic commemoration shed more light on the ramifications of prosumption for collective memory in the physical landscape, and for other forms of prosumption as well.

Traditionally, memorials have been constructed at the behest of elites, to enshrine dominant points of view, and to celebrate the lives and deaths of heroic individuals. The physical construction of a memorial frequently marks a spot in the geographical landscape as meaningful and sacred, either due to the lives lost there—as at the site of a famous battle—or due simply to the ability of memorial architecture to convey a sense of sanctity and solemnity. Such memorials have the power to sustain a particular interpretation of events within collective memory at least partly because of the physical durability of the landscape to which they are attached (Foote, 1997).

Despite their hallowed status, however, memorials do contain the potential for alternate readings and interpretations outside of the intentions of their originators, and are always evolving as new visitors and viewers bring new interpretations (Young, 1993; Santino, 2006). In fact, the creation of memorials, monuments, archives, or museums are necessarily contested processes in which the adherents of competing views of history jockey for control over its representation. The decisions undertaken by archivists, architects, historians, and politicians to include or exclude certain documents, images, or perspectives from institutions of collective memory show that such memory is not merely guarded or acquired, but actively shaped through the very processes of its collection (Brown and Davis-Brown, 1998). Put another way, archives "can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations" (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p. 13).

Rituals of mourning, collection, and commemoration are not undertaken only by, or at the direction of, government officials and other elites; vernacular forms of commemoration have long been a part of the memorial landscape (Bodnar, 1992), and spontaneous public memorialization appears to be a growing trend (Santino, 2006). Whether on the site of a deadly traffic accident, or at the spot where a political figure was murdered, or even scattered around a city which has just been subjected to a terrorist attack, spontaneous shrines composed of some combination of messages to the dead, pictures, flowers, poems, teddy bears, and other kitsch commodities are an increasingly common variety of mourning practice (Sturken, 2007).

These assemblages reflect a breakdown of boundaries between elite and popular culture (Thomas, 2006) and between production and consumption. The spontaneous displays of commemorative artwork, sculpture, banners, and other mementos that spring up quickly at the sites of tragedies and disasters serve to personalize these events for their creators. Some

commentators have also argued that spontaneous commemoration is an inherently political act. As Jack Santino put it, "we who build shrines and construct public altars or parade with photographs of the deceased will not allow you to write off victims as mere regrettable statistics" (Santino, 2006, p. 13). In any case, this prosumption of memorialization speaks to the growing influence of increasingly diverse constituencies who feel ownership over the commemoration of wars, disasters, and other tragedies, as well as an increasing number of "reputational entrepreneurs" (Fine, 2001) who are emotionally and politically invested in these processes. The designing of memorials and monuments have increasingly become hotly disputed affairs in which elites, victims' families, survivors, and ordinary citizens have struggled to establish guiding frameworks (Sturken, 1997; Linenthal, 2001; Sturken, 2007).

Regardless of the frequency and vigor of political debate over memorial designs today, an increasingly common aspect of both official and spontaneous commemoration is the requirement of a therapeutic component. The design and construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the 1980s inaugurated the ideal of the "therapeutic monument" (Savage, 2006), which aimed to help individuals and the nation as a whole heal the psychic wounds inflicted by the Vietnam conflict, rather than simply honoring soldiers or making a political statement. That ethos, with its emphasis on survivors and ordinary citizens, has been applied to the creation of many subsequent monuments and memorials as well, such as the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial (Sturken, 2007).

Of course, the healing function of memorial planning, dedication, and construction has always been at least a latent feature of the process, given that such activities have the power to reunite communities that have been fragmented by wars and other disasters (Foote, 1997). But beginning with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, monuments and memorials have been designed

as more open-ended and reflective experiences, which allow visitors opportunities to empathize with victims, survivors, and their families, or to reflect on the personal and national meaning of the commemorated event, without being pushed towards a particular conclusion or overarching narrative. This represents a form of prosumption in and of itself, since the consumer of the memorial or monument is now expected to produce a therapeutic experience for him or herself, rather than to have the terms of such experience explicitly dictated by the text, architecture, or imagery of the memorial. It is within this context of spontaneous, therapeutic, and prosumer-oriented commemoration that digital archives and memory banks operate and flourish today.

The 9/11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memorial

Although printed magazines and newspapers have long provided forums for national mourning in the wake of tragedies (Kitch, 2003), the speed and interactivity of online networks often allows them to supplement or contradict traditional mass-media coverage. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, online communities like Slashdot.org put up mirror sites of news organizations' websites that had been jammed by the increased traffic, and they also added commentary on their own forums. Mental health organizations immediately focused their websites and online newsletters on the potential post-traumatic stress that Americans might be experiencing, and blogging sites reported a significant increase in postings (Fisher & Porter, 2001). Many message boards across the web provided an immediate source of comfort or catharsis for the countless users who posted prayers for and messages to the victims, and in some cases, spread anti-Arab rage and racist vitriol (Brown, 2001; see also Martin & Phelan, 2002). Similarly, during Hurricane Katrina, online contributors to the message boards of major news networks and writers on Katrina-themed blogs challenged the narratives presented by mainstream journalists and asserted the rights of citizens to tell their stories (Robinson, 2009).

Online information-gathering efforts during a crisis can quickly transform into spontaneous electronic shrines and digital memorials, as was the case with the social networking profiles of the deceased from the Virginia Tech shootings (Creamer, 2007). Similarly, a site called MyDeathSpace.com archives the social networking pages of people who have died and allows visitors to leave comments. Social networking sites also enable users to join groups devoted to various social causes, including the commemoration of disasters. As of April, 5, 2010, MySpace had over 36 groups with 6,561 members devoted to remembering Hurricane Katrina, though many of those members may belong to more than one group, and most of those groups are small—only two have over 1,000 members, and only 14 have over 100 members. It should be noted that by the time Katrina struck, however, MySpace's popularity was already waning, potentially pushing some of the memorial traffic to competing sites like Facebook. It makes sense, then, that MySpace hosts a larger number of September 11-themed groups. As of April, 5, 2010, there were 165 groups with at least ten members devoted to "9/11" in some form or another, comprising a total of 66,316 members, though again some of those may belong to multiple groups. Even with that high number, only four groups have more than 1,000 members, and only 30 groups have more than 100. Many of the smaller groups are local chapters of the 9/11 Truth Movement or advocates of related September 11 conspiracy theories, but the larger groups use less controversial or conspiratorial rhetoric and favor more traditional and patriotic themes.

Such online platforms produce digital archives almost as a byproduct. Threaded posts, profiles, photos, and avatars create a history of online exchanges and allow for the past to be reconstructed on blogs, social networking sites, and wikis, among other platforms (Chayko, 2008). In this way, the interactive and participatory aspects of the Internet generate a kind of

"writable collective memory" (Ulmer, 2005, p. xii), which captures contemporary norms and mores about a whole host of social issues. Rather than crafting a coherent story about disaster, as mainstream media outlets tend to do, the sum total of online disaster commemoration is much more descriptive and fragmentary; its model is the database rather than the narrative (Manovich, 2001; see also Walker, 2007).

The digital archive or digital memory bank format makes this database ideal explicit. The September 11 Digital Archive (http://911digitalarchive.org/), created by CHNM and the American Social History Project at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, currently holds more than 150,000 digital items, including more than 40,000 emails and electronic communications, 40,000 firsthand stories, and 15,000 digital images. Though the archive stopped posting new submissions in June of 2004, it remains publicly available online and through the Library of Congress, which made the collection its first major digital acquisition in September of 2003. The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (http://hurricanearchive.org/), which was created by CHNM, the University of New Orleans, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, currently holds over 25,000 digital items related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Both websites have described their missions in similar terms. The September 11 Digital Archive sought to use September 11 "as a way of assessing how history is being recorded and preserved in the twenty-first century," while also hoping "to foster some positive legacies of those terrible events by allowing people to tell their stories, making those stories available to a wide audience, providing historical context for understanding those events and their consequences, and helping historians and archivists improve their practices based on the lessons we learn from this project" (http://911digitalarchive.org/about/index.php). The staff of the

Hurricane Digital Memory Bank also hoped to cultivate "positive legacies by allowing the people affected by these storms to tell their stories in their own words, which as part of the historical record will remain accessible to a wide audience for generations to come" (http://hurricanearchive.org/about/).

Each site emphasized its utility as a form of historical documentation, and both described their objectives as simply "collecting and preserving" the memories associated with these events. But by emphasizing the promotion of "positive legacies," their creators clearly see the sites' functions not only in terms of historical documentation but also as a form of therapy, akin to the recent move towards therapeutic memorialization in the physical landscape. As a co-creator of the similarly designed April 16 Archive (devoted to the Virginia Tech shootings) put it, "if the items we have archived provide some measure of healing and recovery for those touched by the violence of that fateful day… then this project will have been a success" (Jesiek & Hunsinger, 2008, p. 203). As such, these sites make explicit the connections between digital prosumption, self-help, and commemoration. To better understand the deployment of therapeutic and commemorative rhetoric in digital memory banks, I analyzed the stories submitted by users at the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank.[4]

Many of the stories and messages posted at both sites fulfilled a very basic function of memorials: commemorating the dead. Like spontaneous shrines in the physical landscape, entries in the digital archives often commemorated the life of a particular victim; in these cases the

[4] At the time of my research, the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank had 1,209 user-submitted stories. For this study, I read all of them, but omitted several types of entries, including any that were written in languages other than English, any that were not actually submitted by their authors (some people posted news articles or other content they had not written), or any that were classified incorrectly (ie. were describing a picture and thus should have been in the 'Images' section), and any poetry, on the grounds that having to interpret poetry would stretch the reliability of my analysis. This left me with a sample of 963 stories or messages. I used the same criteria for the September 11 Digital Archive, but because their section of 'Stories from site visitors' contained 7,126 entries, I randomly sampled 41 pages of entries for a total of 369 stories or messages, which was down to 345 entries after some of the entries were omitted for the reasons already mentioned.

entries' authors were usually friends or family members of the deceased. Some messages described what it was like to experience the loss of a loved one, or commemorated aspects of a particular victim's personality. One user whose brother worked on the 100th floor of World Trade Center Tower One wrote: "I could not believe what was going on and then when the towers collapsed my heart stopped. I sat there helplessly and watch as my brother die right before my eyes and I could not do a thing to help him, it was the worst felling in the world… I will miss my brother very much" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=11639). Another described the loss of her close friend who was a passenger on American Airlines Flight 11:

> My friend perished in the blaze aboard flight 11. She was a fighter and I am sure she did what she could to prevent those men from trying to get into the cockpit… She is a hero as all who were on that plane and the other planes are. As the plane crashed through the tower with what I can imagine as terrified faces of those aboard, I envision her smiling face. Her lively personality, her generous spirit, her laughter is what I think of (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=4726).

Stories at the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank described such losses in similar ways:

> As the sun was going down on August 29, 2005, my 95-year-old, invalid mother died in my arms as we tried to escape the rising flood waters coming into our house by climbing the fold-down stairs into the attic of our house… Without going into exhaustive detail, I will simply say that my past life died that day with Mother and my dogs. I now wish to devote my life to living my life to be a blessing to others (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/41700).

In addition to commemorating those who died, these sorts of entries also entailed a kind of working-through of personal trauma. Many entries in both archives made reference to the psychological after-effects of these disasters, such as depression, stress, or compulsively reliving the events in ones' head. Five percent of the entries in the Hurricane Memory Bank made these sorts of references to trauma, as did 8% of those at the September 11 Archive. A Hurricane Katrina survivor explained:

> Hurricane Katrina has been a tremendous strain on my life and I continue to try to put it behind me. It has been such a struggle for almost 3 years. When I went back home after Katrina that I was so traumatized that I chose to not remember much of those 6 months there. I would always go to my house just so I could get disgusted and angry… Katrina didn't just take my house. She took my home, my childhood, and my mental state. The person I used to be was lost along with everything else (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/35635).

Other authors told similar tales of disaster's lingering psychological affects, although they had only watched the September 11 attacks on television. One user explained: "A year later, I finally came out of my state of shock. It turned to depression. My fiancé and I broke up. I left to return to Chicago. I am receiving treatment and am trying to piece my life back together again. I will, but there will be a few pieces missing… I wasn't in the World Trade Center, so I can't tell you what they lost, I only know how adversely it affected my life" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=4687). Another described the symptoms of this vicarious trauma: "For weeks after September 11 I had terrible nightmares involving hijacked planes and buildings… I would hear a jet go over head and do what I think many did in the immediate aftermath, look to see where it was and what it was doing… For weeks afterward the sight of low flying aircraft would send a shiver down my spine" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=7995).

Such messages speak to the ways in which mass-mediated national tragedies can nonetheless be personalized by individual viewers, and intertwined with other painful aspects of one's past. One commenter recalled:

> On September 11, 2001, I had taken the day off to be at home in my own grief. My oldest son was killed on September 11, 1996. I never watch television, but on this sad day for me, I found myself pouring another cup of coffee and bringing it into the bedroom and turning on the TV. Not five minutes later, I watched in horror as the events began to unfold. I cannot explain what this did to me, but I was shaking uncontrollably, crying… not only for my own loss, but to know that now so many others will mourn the loss of their own children and loved ones. It is a pain that no one should have to know. The anniversary of my son's death is now

> shared by so many in our country. As was my son's death, the deaths on 9/11/01 were senseless and at the hands of others. My heart goes out to each and every person who has lost a loved one. It never gets any easier, the pain never goes away. It just gets 'different.'
> (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=7683).

Stories like these make explicit the psychological damage that disasters may inflict on those directly affected, as well as on distant spectators. In their telling, they seek to enact a therapeutic transformation for themselves and others. Implicit in many of the comments on both sites was the hope that one's own story would help others to heal or at least understand the grief that they feel, as the commenter's remark that "the pain never goes away. It just gets 'different'" seemed to suggest. But users also hoped to provide themselves with a psychic salve by writing out their thoughts and feelings. One user acknowledged that people may have "heard enough stories of Hurricane Katrina" but stated that, "The rest of this story is my psychological outlet for what has built up for a year." Later in the entry, the user wondered, "How do I condense the rest and make it meaningful?" but decided to continue with his lengthy entry "because this is my therapy, finally" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/13301). Similarly, one September 11 survivor put this hopeful spin on the disaster's painful aftermath: "The images and memories are haunting me, and the scars are very deep at this moment. I'm not always able to keep it together emotionally. But despite the horror of it all, there is a great feeling of hope inside me. I must be around for some reason, and I certainly intend to find out" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=7170).

Thus, many of the messages left by survivors, victims' family members, and distant spectators alike appropriated rhetoric from the language of therapeutic self-help. Occasionally this came in the form of a "cross-counseling" dialogue that offered palliative advice to other imagined readers who shared in one's suffering over a disaster. At other times, the act of

contributing to these memorials was explicitly framed as self-help, as a way of working through one's own trauma by the simple act of telling one's story.

Though these comments explicitly addressed the therapeutic quality of such online commemoration, many other messages focused on healing of a more traditional, spiritual nature. Some of the most frequently expressed sentiments in the messages left at both the Archive and the Memory Bank were explicitly religious. Thirty-three percent of the September 11 Archive messages contained religious references (although some were simply phrases like "God Bless America"), while 12% of the Hurricane Memory Bank postings contained religious content. Many authors, like the following who posted to the September 11 collection, were steadfast in their religious beliefs:

> Watching the news the entire evening with our children was a difficult but memorable experience. We had an opportunity to explain why evil exist in light of what the Bible teaches. More importantly, it provided a reference point for giving them an eternal perspective to the fallen nature of this world and the hope we have when Jesus Christ returns… In many respects, although I would never wish the atrocity on any other human being, I'm glad that my children were exposed to the tragedy" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=4766).

Some users also found these tragedies to be cause for religiously motivated introspection. A Digital Archive post mused, "To say God has a plan is all well and good I suppose, but the hijackers also believed they were carrying out God's plan didn't they?" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=7995). And a Memory Bank user admitted:

> I'm still trying to work through why my life and the lives of my children were spared. Why was I at the right place at the right time when so many clearly were not? Do I have an obligation to the people who suffered so directly and profoundly? If so, what is it? If not, why not? Is life that random? And if life is that random then why do we spend so much time in churches, synagogues, and mosques? (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/1).

Such musings combined questions about luck and theodicy with concerns over the moral obligation to help others in need. These same sorts of questions have become commonplace in other parts of American popular culture as well, especially on daytime talk shows (Illouz, 2003).

Many entries at these sites reflected a basic desire to express or vent one's emotions, especially one's fear, sadness, anger, or frustration. Some expressed anger at the media for inaccurate or overly sensational coverage. One submission to the September 11 Digital Archive asked "that the next time there is a major attack or tradegy in America, that the media, please DO NOT constantly bombard us over and over and over with the same images. Think of what this is doing to the minds and hearts of the victims families, children, etc." (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=11053). A Hurricane Digital Memory Bank contributor critiqued the unsettlingly quick and ultimately inaccurate way in which television news media came to consensus about the initial effects of the storm: "All these reporters were reading from the same script. There was no healthy disagreement, as if the source of all the information was one guy" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/13275). Still others focused their ire on the longer period of post-Katrina coverage, as did one author who wished "that the media would try to focus on the rebuilding efforts as they did with the destruction" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/25936).

Similarly, anger was directed towards federal, state, and local government in 14% of the entries at the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank. However, such messages of anger were far less common in the September 11 Digital Archive. Instead, entries in that archive were much more likely to praise the federal government, as well as local police and firemen. When anger was expressed, it was usually directed at terrorists. One user summed up these post-9/11 sentiments thusly:

> As the day continued into days and weeks and months, I became very proud to be an American as we were watching the heroics of all the police & fireman and construction crews working around the clock to save people and recover the bodies of the victims. Regardless of the costs, we must continue the war on terrorism until it is wiped from this planet (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=14373).

Other messages referred to the fear and sadness associated with these tragedies. One contributor stated "I now felt that I was living in fear and that 'they' could attack from anywhere. Not only in the air, not only on land, but by chemical warfare. They could put things in our water; they could put things in our food, or even make us inhale things that were unsafe to humans. The question that still remains is why? And when will this end?" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=6204). By providing an outlet for raw emotional expression, the September 11 Digital Archive captured the grief and paranoia of post-9/11 America; both websites offered the chance for users to undergo a kind of catharsis through such emotional sharing.

Another common trope in the messages on both sites was the notion that these disasters might have ultimately served a beneficial purpose, either by inspiring acts of kindness towards others, by calling renewed attention to the preciousness of human life, or by offering a chance to rebuild in an improved fashion. For instance, one user commented that "on that day, I saw the true New York that everyone knows lies beneath the usual reputation. NYC became one big village that day" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=17201). Another added "It seems like a war is the only thing that brings people back to their senses and sense of patriotism, values, and morals" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=4608). Still another commenter asserted that "In some ways, I hope we don't return to the days before September 11. We were, I'm sorry, but such greedy, selfish, self-absorbed, spoiled brats. Dear God, please don't ever let me lose my perspective again"

(http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=14102). And a Hurricane Katrina survivor ended her comments by writing that her "Katrina story now merges with that of all my co-workers, neighbors and friends who have returned to 'Rebuild a Greater New Orleans.' We are now part of a bigger story that will be written in the history books. The same faith that sustained us all through our travails will sustain us through the months and years ahead. Our individual stories will serve as prelude to that story, not as epitaph" (http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/672). If the experience of posting a message or story on a digital archive is indeed a form of self-help, then these sentiments provided a measure of closure by describing a world in which oneself, one's family, and even one's nation had suffered, but had nonetheless transformed that suffering into something positive.

National Identity and the Limits of Empathy

It is safe to assume that most of those who went online and uploaded a message at either of these two digital archives did so, at least in part, due to some emotional connection to these disasters or those who suffered through them. But this emotional connection varied between the two disasters, and caused two groups of people to submit to these sites in very different proportions. User-submitted stories and messages at both the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank tended to make reference to the author's own experience with the disaster. Thus, it was generally easy to determine whether or not a respondent had been directly affected (i.e. had been in lower Manhattan on September 11, or in the geographical area hit by hurricanes Katrina or Rita); whether she had a friend or loved one who was affected (in the Hurricane Digital Memory bank sample this occasionally referred to those who volunteered after the storm and forged close relationships with those who had been affected); or if the respondent was not directly affected at all (as with many of the contributors who described watching the

events on television—although many of these users would probably have described themselves as directly affected *because* they watched on television).

Using this framework on a sample of the September 11 Digital Archive, it was determined that the large majority of stories (80%) were submitted by those not directly affected by the attacks, while 11% of the stories were submitted by those with an affected loved one, and 8% by those who were directly affected (in 1% of submitted stories it was impossible to tell what the author's relationship to the 9/11 attacks was). By contrast, the large majority of stories (73%) in the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank were submitted by those directly affected by one of the storms, while 10% were submitted by those with affected loved ones, 10% were from unaffected authors, and 7% came from entries where the author's relationship to the storms was impossible to determine. Part of this discrepancy is surely due to the very different geographical reach of these two catastrophes. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed countless homes and properties across a huge swath of the country, and even those whose properties and homes remained unharmed may have had to evacuate for several days—a scenario that was described many times in the sample by those directly affected. By contrast, only those in or near the World Trade Center complex, the Pentagon, or the Shanksville, PA crash site of Flight 93 on September 11 were directly affected in this same sense.

But another explanation for the fact that many unaffected people submitted stories to the September 11 Archive, while far fewer did so in the Hurricane Memory Bank, has to do with the role September 11 played in constructions of American nationalism overall. Five percent of Hurricane Digital Memory Bank users framed their stories in terms of the local community—either as a crisis in their own towns or cities such as Waveland or New Orleans, or as a tragedy for the entire Gulf Coast—while only 3% described the storms as affecting the entire nation, or

as having repercussions for the United States as a whole. One user who applied a regional framework to Hurricane Katrina said

> I love New Orleans, its people and culture. There truly is no other place like it in the United States. During my evacuation travels, people said ugly things like let it go, why go back, the sins of the city caused this, etc. I explained the life style here. They all marveled at it and understood. Do we tell the midwest to evacuate and leave forever because of tornadoes; or California people to leave forever because of fire storms and so on? Of course not. We will rebuild I said (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/41734).

Entries such as this reflected the sense that, as coverage of Hurricane Katrina dragged on, Americans in other parts of the country began to blame the citizens of New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf region for the terrible aftermath. For instance, many messages sought to correct the national news media's portrayal of survivors as "looters," as did one contributor who argued "the so-called looters are simply grabbing water, food, diapers and medicines, because the federal and state officials have refused to provide these basic necessities" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/33640).

By contrast, the commemorative messages at the September 11 Digital Archive reflected an understanding of that disaster as a national event that largely transcended the regional boundaries of affected areas. Thirty five percent of the September 11 archive sample framed the 9/11 attacks as part of American national identity, while only 2% described them solely in terms of the local community. One author commented that "Terrorists tried to bomb the life out of New York City, but ordinary people saved each other" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=11238), yet such a New York-centered framework was rare. Instead, many authors of submissions to the September 11 archive ended their messages with some variation of the phrase "God Bless America," and described September 11 as "such a sad day for America" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=17313).

Similarly national frameworks did not appear nearly as frequently in the hurricane archive, though one Memory Bank contributor did remark that "When Katrina hit, I saw a change in the way Americans view 'attacks' on the United States even if it was a national disaster compared to a terrorist attack" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/4406).

The nationalistic response in the Digital Archive mirrors the overall reaction to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the mainstream media and in public life in general, all of which were flooded by an immediate surge of patriotism and support for the government. This was somewhat reflected in the September 11 archive sample as well: 4% of messages expressed pro-government sentiments, while just 1% expressed anger at the government. One Digital Archive contributor used the site to describe her post-9/11 renewal of nationalism: "I've come to realize how much I love my country. I appreciate the people in the armed services, the firemen and the policemen more than I ever thought I would. I love the American flag" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=18322). Another contributor expressed very similar sentiments on the one year anniversary of the attacks, but with a slightly ominous, militaristic tone: "Today, a year later, our nation still stands proud, strong, and united, as promised by President Bush. As we keep those lost in this act of terrorism in our thoughts and prayers, the fight against terrorism continues. And trust me, the battle has JUST begun" (http://911digitalarchive.org/parser.php?object_id=11352). This idea that the September 11 attacks were an act of war, and that the subsequent war on terror was a just one, was perpetuated by frequent historical comparisons to Pearl Harbor, which happened in 4% of the sample, making it by far the most frequent historical comparison, much as it was in the print and televised media discussed in chapter two of this dissertation.

In contrast, 14% of submissions to the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank expressed anti-government sentiment directed at either federal, state, or local authorities, while just 1% of those submissions praised government authorities. As one fairly representative comment from the memory bank stated, "In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the federal government did a terrible job. No doubt about that. Americans stranded on roofs. Americans without food and water. People in war-ravaged, dysfunctional nations looking at us on television saw that our country could be just as dysfunctional as their own" (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/26229). Another user lamented the lack of disaster preparedness on the part of the Army Corps of Engineers:

> Of all the things that happened that week, the one I cannot get over is that the city and the Army Corp of Engineers did not have an emergency plan to patch a levee breach. Certainly they would have a few helicopters or barges and a few hundred tons of sandbags sitting around waiting to be rushed to a breach. It was inconceivable that if a levee started to break the emergency plan was to watch it on television. But that, in fact, was the plan (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/13276).

These sentiments were also in keeping with public opinion as a whole on Hurricane Katrina, which was largely seen as a failure on the part of numerous state and federal agencies (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, September 8, 2005).

The fact that most Hurricane Digital Memory Bank users were themselves directly affected by the storm, while most September 11 Digital Archive users were not directly affected by the terrorist attacks, is suggestive of the ways in which national identity has been constructed around September 11 by political and media elites in the last decade. September 11 was experienced as a national turning point, in which unspeakable tragedy had called forth many acts of heroism and kindness, and a renewed sense of American resolve. By contrast, Hurricane Katrina, and the government's inept response to it, became a mark of national shame. As such,

although both of these disasters were witnessed by millions of Americans on live television, and although both monopolized popular culture for many weeks, people from all over America felt moved to commemorate September 11 online, while the majority of Americans who posted online reflections of Hurricane Katrina were those from the affected region. Thus, despite its mission to collect and preserve memories of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank abetted national forgetting as well as remembering, since few who were not from the immediately affected regions contributed.

Of course, all forms of commemoration and archiving necessarily involve the exclusion of certain perspectives, thereby enabling a gradual forgetting of details not included in official collections or representations. But in this case, the lack of a nation-wide contingent of contributors to the Memory Bank speaks to the perception of those in the region that their plight was too quickly forgotten by the rest of the United States. One user described this as a waning of national sympathy:

> When Hurricane Katrina hit, our nation offered us sympathy. Millions of Americans accepted us into their cities. They sent 18-wheelers heavy with goodwill and provisions. Others came here, donned hazard suits and helped us. But I fear this compassion is wearing thin. It has been nearly 18 months. By now, the thinking goes, real Americans, self-reliant Americans, would have picked themselves up by their stiff upper lips and gotten on with life (http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/26229).

This drying up of compassion—"Katrina fatigue," as some have called it—speaks to the limits of contemporary mass-mediated empathy. Inasmuch as it is possible to vicariously experience the pain and suffering of others, this experience is still refracted through one's own pre-existing biases based on age, race, class, gender, or even geographical region. Additionally, one may be more likely to engage empathetically with the kinds of suffering that reaffirm one's existing belief system, rather than suffering that calls one's core beliefs into question. Thus the

pain of 9/11, with its grieving widows, its heroic firefighters and police, and its calls for national unity, confirmed the belief in American exceptionalism that many already held. As such, many felt encouraged to post their reflections in a digital archive despite knowing no one who was directly affected by the attacks—a sign that September 11 was the whole nation's disaster, and that vicarious, mass-mediated empathy was an appropriate response for distant spectators. Yet despite similar levels of media coverage, and an initially similar outpouring of national emotion, Hurricane Katrina's victims were beset by various forms of victim-blame and racial stereotyping, which aided a national distancing and ultimately marked the disaster as a regional one, even though federal agencies like FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Guard had played such a large role. In that sense, the fact that so few unaffected individuals posted online remembrances at the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank shows that digital archives can also reflect the processes of distancing and forgetting that have occurred throughout American culture regarding Hurricane Katrina.

The Politics of Therapeutic Commemoration

The stories and messages submitted to September 11 Digital Archive and Hurricane Digital Memory Bank exhibited several forms of therapeutic rhetoric and commemorative strategies associated with conventional sites of collective memory in the physical landscape. One very traditional type of rhetoric employed in these messages involved the use of religious language and references to God. Such rhetoric sought to provide comfort to an imagined audience of suffering readers, and perhaps to the authors themselves as well, through tried-and-true references to the wisdom of a higher power. However, some of these religious reflections also turned inward, adopting a more personal, diary-like style in order to ponder age-old philosophical questions about the role of God in times of great pain and loss.

Another seemingly traditional function of the messages at these sites was the commemoration of the dead. However, it is worth remembering that monuments and memorials to everyday people and victims of tragedies are, with some exceptions, a rather recent phenomenon. A number of entries coped with this commemorative tradition by labeling the victims of these disasters as "heroes"—since heroes have always been popular subjects for commemoration. But interestingly, some authors simply used their entries to describe personality quirks and other mundane details about the deceased. This reflected a more prosumer-oriented style of commemoration, in which users themselves determined the significance of the words and images that were to be collected and made part of a memorial, and in which commonplace aspects of daily life were deemed worthy of collection and memorialization.

These digital archives also sought to enact a kind of healing for the nation as a whole, through acts of both remembering and forgetting. The traumas of war have often been made more palatable to national consciousness through consumer-oriented forms of commemoration, a process that Mosse (1990) has described as "trivialization." In some ways this process was at work in the September 11 Digital Archive as well. The prosumers who contributed to these archives reaffirmed that the entire country had been affected by the September 11 attacks, even if they themselves were not directly affected, and even though their messages and recollections sometimes concerned little more than trivial details or brief, almost perfunctory messages of condolence. On the other hand, the relative lack of unaffected spectators posting messages at the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank suggests that the free and open quality of public, digital archives does not necessarily result in high levels of commemorative online expression if the nation as a whole would rather forget about a dubious period in its history.

In this way, digital memory banks and online archives sidestep some of the political questions about the representation of disasters within collective memory. Traditionally, archives and other repositories of collective memory in physical space have had to decide what documents and artifacts were worth storing and what ones they did not have room for, as well as how to display the artifacts they did collect. These decisions were necessarily political, and frequently elicited objections "voiced by conservatives who abhor efforts of archives and museums to educate (and not only to edify) their publics" (Brown and Davis-Brown, 1998, p. 20). While the memory banks described here did not have to deal with physical space limitations, and were thus able to include any and all submissions from survivors, victims' family members, and distant spectators in an equal fashion, such inclusiveness meant that no larger narrative or overarching theme about the disaster existed on these sites. This may ultimately be a more equitable way of collecting and storing recollections of the recent past, but it does suggest a shift away from older, more didactic forms of commemoration that inspired political debate over what to collect and how to present it.

This movement away from explicit efforts at meaning-making is a phenomenon associated with recent memorials in the physical landscape as well, one which Kirk Savage has discussed in relation to the plans for a World Trade Center memorial:

> Some might decide that the best way to create a memorial that "evolves" is to avoid the question of meaning altogether, to create a "neutral" memorial that asks visitors to generate their own "personal and private" interpretations of the event. But another response to these requirements would be to confront the question of meaning, not to fix it or impose it in the traditional didactic manner but to frame questions rather than answers, still leaving room for understanding to evolve (Savage, 2006, p. 115).

In online memorials where users supply all or most of the content, the sites' creators have little ability to guide visitors or frame questions. Instead, the more haphazard navigation of online

archives and memory banks allows for a panoply of potential experiences for users that, to paraphrase Savage (2006, p. 115), are just as likely to "inspire hate and a desire for revenge," as to create some sort of psychic healing or deeper understanding, depending on the particular entries one searches for or stumbles upon. Moreover, one wonders whether the sheer number of submissions to these sites will make it hard for visitors in the future to find any particularly insightful or moving messages amidst this cacophony of commemoration. This remains a potentially problematic aspect of this new and democratic form of collective memory.

The difficulty of navigating as a reader through the multitude of submissions on these sites reinforces the fact that they are designed primarily as outlets for active prosumption, rather than passive consumption. While the experience of the Box family described at the start of this chapter was certainly one in which a similar archive was successfully 'consumed,' these archives appear to be used more often for a therapeutic form of self-help in which prosumers can leave their own messages and stories behind to enact their own psychological fulfillment. These archives provide ample opportunities to work through the trauma associated with surviving a disaster, or simply watching it on television, and can simulate a kind of cross-counseling dialogue with an imagined readership of suffering others. Although emotional self-expression often generates new and somewhat unpredictable emotions (Reddy, 2001), it seems fairly uncontroversial to believe that the public talking- or writing-through of one's pain or suffering surrounding a disaster can indeed elicit a positive emotional transformation, or at least help ease a tiny bit of that suffering. In that sense, these digital archives and memory banks presumably fulfilled their missions of fostering "positive legacies," at least for the individuals who contributed to them.

However, if one takes these digital memory banks seriously as therapeutic experiences, then the memory banks also warrant criticism on those grounds. Critics like Eva Moskowitz have taken America's popular faith in therapy to task for offering fast and simple solutions over rigorous psychological thinking, and because "our emphasis on the individual psyche has blinded us to underlying social realities" (Moskowitz, 2001, p. 283). Something similar may have been at work in the therapeutic messages within these digital archives, which largely presented disasters as obstacles that had caused pain and suffering for individual authors, but which could and would be overcome by those individuals. Even messages that addressed the nation as a whole frequently transposed this narrative of individual self-improvement to a national context. As Eva Illouz has pointed out, "Recycling narratives of self-help into narratives of self-improvement… erases the scandal of suffering" (Illouz, 2003, p. 234). Thus, when a user explained that September 11 offered a profound lesson on good and evil for her young children, or when another hoped that America would never return to the "spoiled" days before 9/11, or even when a Katrina survivor spoke passionately about rebuilding a greater New Orleans, they risked minimizing the real horror and scandalous injustice of both these disasters, no matter how measured their language might have been or how understandable the impulse was to positively reframe these tragedies.

Much of the politics behind vernacular forms of commemoration such as digital archives and spontaneous shrines is individualistic; it focuses on the commemoration of individual victims as protest against the urge to forget or the depersonalization that is somewhat inherent towards victims of mass tragedies (Santino, 2006). As John Torpey (2006) has argued regarding reparations politics, however, such a perspective is in many ways a poor substitute for the progressive visions of the future associated with older political movements. He argues that "a

legalistic, therapeutic, and theological attitude towards the past has tended to supplant the quest of active citizens and mobilized constituencies for an alternative future" (Torpey, 2006, p. 15). This backwards-looking, individualistic politics is essentially a form of nostalgia. As Maurice Halbwachs recognized long ago, "That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 49). Such nostalgia was often evident in the messages at both archives, and though it is almost unavoidably human, it is also unlikely to inspire progressive social change.

In this sense, the prosumption of therapeutic commemoration forestalls other forms of collective mobilization around disasters, since it teaches that the mass suffering brought about by catastrophes like September 11 and Hurricane Katrina is something to be overcome through many disparate acts of individual healing, rather than an unacceptable injustice requiring bold transformations in the social structure. Given the many problematic aspects of the government's response to both these disasters, and the general hostility to collective action in the current neo-liberal moment, it makes sense that digital memory banks and archives reflect the predominantly individualistic, therapeutic attitude towards many social problems in American society today. With no strong, progressive political movements emerging from these two disasters, at least individuals may find psychological comfort for themselves at these digital archives, either by reading the messages of others, or by contributing their own stories and reflections.

But critics of therapeutic culture argue that such individual comfort may come at the expense of the larger, more conventional purposes of community (see Reiff, 1966). The last several decades in the United States have seen "lifestyle enclaves," geared towards private forms of leisure and consumption, supplant more traditional forms of communal organization (Bellah

et. al, 1985). Inasmuch as online sites of commemoration reflect this trend, then the simple act of reaffirming one's identity and having one's framework of meaning reinforced by others online is likely a therapeutic experience.

> However, where communities had once functioned as a source of these identities and moral frameworks, there is now a tendency to emphasize how individuals can choose and construct communities that share and affirm their pre-established, self-derived identities. As a result, there is little to keep online communities from being reduced to communities of therapeutic function alone, again at the expense of external communal ends (Song, 2004, p. 144).

Thus, one wonders about the aggregate functions of this largely individualistic, therapeutic approach to commemoration. If collective memory is more than simply a collection of individual memories, then one cannot assume that the therapeutic effects of these sites necessarily extends beyond the level of individual experience. Submitting one's messages or stories to a vast digital archive may offer an authentic experience of personal catharsis, but it remains unclear how useful these archives will be at inspiring positive change on a community-wide level.

Conclusion: Online Commemoration and Authenticity

Recollection of the past has always been an "active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information" (Schwartz, 1982, p. 374). In this sense, the collective construction of historical memory has exhibited aspects of what may be called prosumption since long before various forms of online collaboration between producers and consumers made the term fashionable. War heroes, politicians, workers, teachers, screenwriters, television viewers, museum architects, archivists, and memorial visitors all participate in the co-construction, and frequent revision, of collective memory. We are all, to some extent, prosumers of history.

Yet collective memory is more than an aggregation of idiosyncratic individual recollections. As Jeffrey Olick reminds us,

> there are clearly demonstrable long-term structures to what societies remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them. Powerful institutions clearly value some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate memory in ways and for reasons that have nothing to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records (Olick, 1999, p. 342).

With this insight in mind, it seems that another way to determine or define the authenticity of online, prosumer-oriented forms of commemoration may be the degree to which they offer challenges or alternatives to the constructions of history favored and supported by dominant institutions.

By that standard, digital archives did offer an authentic challenge to the mainstream news media. Although they accounted for less than 5% of the overall submissions to the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, there were nonetheless entries in this archive that exposed the flaws, inadequacies, or ethical lapses of the mainstream news organizations' Katrina coverage. As has already been discussed, some contributors sought to correct the frequent mischaracterization of storm victims, especially African Americans, as looters. In fact, pro-social behavior was one of the two most frequently occurring themes in the stories posted to the Memory Bank, offering a much-needed corrective to the notion that Katrina loosed mere anarchy upon the world.

Some users of the Digital Memory Bank struggled with the ethics of media representation itself. One contributor described his media-induced disregard for the suffering of others, and his eventual change of heart upon meeting an actual survivor of Hurricane Katrina. He wrote, "I'd seen the flashes of shredded houses and frantic victims of Hurricane Katrina on television. Sure, I'd felt pity for them and their families, but honestly, after the media stopped posting headliners of the disaster on newspapers, I'd let the event slip out of my mind… It was horrifying what Katrina did, but it didn't really affect me" (http://www.hurricanearchive.org/object/4493).

Another contributor described the events behind the creation of what eventually became an iconic photo:

> They told us we had to lay him at the side of the road. At my insistence he was brought to the entrance of City Park. I covered him with a green cloth and a properly folded American flag. When we saw him a couple days later the green shroud had been replaced by the unfolded flag. Someone told me that Newsweek had published the picture. It bothered me to think that someone may have changed the tableau (ie. put the opened flag and lay it over the body) just to "get the shot." I think I'm OK with it now that I understand the picture might have had enough emotional impact to jar those with the ability to help out of complacency (http://hurricanearchive.org/object/672).

Such nuanced criticism suggests that the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank offered thoughtful, alternative perspectives on the media's coverage of the storm and its aftermath, and a venue in which those who harbored such perspectives could express themselves. Furthermore, unlike so many of the examples of disaster consumption described in this dissertation, these archives have remained non-profit ventures with no advertisements and no access fees. It should be noted, however, that fewer than 1% of the messages in the September 11 sample contained similar media criticism.

Besides critiquing mainstream media, both of these digital archives essentially circumvented the political and cultural gatekeepers who normally decide on the content of permanent, official memorials in the physical landscape. Spontaneous commemorators of tragedy online and in the physical landscape were able to have a say in the content of the memorials they helped create, even if they had no training in architecture or design, and even if neither they nor any of their family members had been victimized. Furthermore, these prosumers got to decide for themselves what images, messages, and stories were worth collecting and archiving, thus evading the power of archivists and museum curators to make such determinations. And like other forms of vernacular memorial expression, this online

commemoration sped up the time frame of memorial creation. Rather than waiting to visit an official memorial that may have taken more than a decade to complete, spontaneous commemorators began to contribute to the construction of memorials on the Internet or on street corners and in city squares even while these disastrous events were still ongoing. This emerging norm of near-immediate commemoration has actually begun to change the pace with which official memorials are designed and constructed as well; for example, the 1966 shooting at the University of Texas was not commemorated with a memorial on that campus until 1999, but Virginia Tech had begun planning a temporary memorial on campus within weeks of its 2007 shooting (Stearns, 2008). In any case, one advantage of vernacular spaces of online commemoration over spontaneous physical memorials is that online memorials have actually tended to last longer—although some physical locations of tragedy and death have become permanent shrines, the initial, vernacular contributions to these spaces were almost always eventually moved away and either destroyed or housed elsewhere, especially if such sites were in everyday use or had been slated to be rebuilt.

That said, the bulk of what has been collected at both the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank has tended to reflect, rather than challenge, mass-mediated public opinion and conventional wisdom about these two disasters. The most frequently occurring themes in the messages of the September 11 archive, by a wide margin, were national patriotism and religion, thus mimicking much mainstream discourse in popular culture around that disaster. Along with the theme of pro-social behavior, anger at the government was one of the two most frequently occurring topics in the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, followed very closely by stories of anti-social behavior, religious topics, and rebuilding or resilience. In both archives, such themes were entirely appropriate and

understandable, but they nonetheless echoed the sorts of ideas commonly expressed in mass media and consumer culture, as well as those enshrined in official memorials and archives. Even the therapeutic potential of reading and contributing messages at these digital archives was very much in keeping with prevailing norms surrounding mass-mediated emotion and the empathetic consumption of others' suffering.

Yet the conventional character of so many of the messages and sentiments in these archives did not ultimately mark them as inauthentic for those who continued to read and contribute to them. If the messages and stories of thousands of archive contributors are to be believed, these sites facilitated real emotional reactions and genuinely thoughtful responses, as well as accurate descriptions of disaster in all its quotidian reality. There is certainly value in collecting such responses for posterity, even if they fail to contest prevailing belief systems or resist existing normative structures. As such, one must conclude that today's subjective cultural codes of authenticity do not rely on the degree to which supposedly authentic texts, products, or other phenomena offer controversial or oppositional takes on the usually sacrosanct topic of disaster. Indeed, an archive filled primarily with comments that were politically challenging, aesthetically sophisticated, or wildly idiosyncratic would likely be perceived as inauthentic, and would appear as if they had been created by a specialized audience or group with a particular political, cultural, or artistic agenda. Sites such as the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, in which challenging or oppositional entries were tempered by many others consisting of mundane details and conventional wisdom, are much more likely to radiate the appropriately authentic aura, which serves to assure visitors that other regular people created these entries free from any preconceived biases or agendas. If nothing else, such an aura

helps establish the kind of trust in strangers on which therapeutic online encounters typically rely (see Song, 2004).

Beyond its therapeutic purposes, the constitution of an aura of reality or genuineness at digital archives calls into question the larger role of authenticity in disaster consumption. As a set of subjective, aesthetic criteria, authenticity ultimately has more to do with form than substance. In these online archives, authenticity was derived from open access to the process of record keeping, and from one's ability to co-create a small portion of the records being kept. In other examples discussed throughout this dissertation, it has emanated from shaky camera work, intimate close-ups of traumatized interviewees, frightened voices of normally calm news anchors, the home-made digital "manifesto" of a deranged killer, or artifacts and souvenirs taken from physical locations marked by tragedy. These cues to the authenticity of products or media have little to do with the substance of what is said or meant by disaster-related texts and commodities. In this way, the authenticity of disaster allows individuals with a wide variety of viewpoints and backgrounds to forge vicarious emotional connections, without the obstacles of explicitly political or otherwise controversial discourse.

However, being reduced to a set of aesthetic criteria leaves authenticity subject to manipulation and deceit. For instance, reality television has mastered the art of staging contests, confrontations, and emotional breakdowns that carry aesthetic or emotional markers of authenticity, but which are nonetheless predictable, profitable, and occasionally pre-planned by these shows' actors. More to the point, as discussed in previous chapters, the aura of disaster has frequently been capitalized on by politicians pushing unpopular wars or inequitable domestic policies, and by marketers selling fantasies of safety and security that may actually make us less safe from future risks. Thus, American consumer culture's current obsession with authenticity is

liable to steer us towards some very inauthentic ends, and the new forms of disaster prosumption described in this chapter appear to be part of that trend, rather than an answer to it.

As a final point of comparison, the official memorials devoted to September 11 and Hurricane Katrina provide an interesting parallel to these two digital archives. The idea of a 9/11 memorial has been a national priority since almost immediately after the attacks, and the money devoted to that tragedy's three memorial sites reflects this. The cost of the Flight 93 memorial in Shanksville, PA has been estimated at $56 million, the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial at $32 million, and the budget for the World Trade Center memorial and museum is over $500 million, which was drastically decreased after the initial plans topped the $1 billion mark (Pitz, 2009; Dwyer, 2006; BBC News, 2006; Frangos, 2006). By contrast, like much of the efforts to rebuild New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast, plans for an official memorial to Hurricane Katrina have been modest, and have received little national attention. The blueprint for rebuilding New Orleans initially called for a $3.5 million memorial (Bohrer, 2007), but the actual design conceived and stewarded by New Orleans coroner Frank Minyard is projected to cost just $1.5 million, plus an additional $500,000 for perpetual care (MacCash, 2007). It is telling, then, that the digital memorials studied here largely mimicked this unequal division of national interest and resources: the September 11 Digital Archive had many times the amount of contributors as the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, and those who did contribute to the latter were usually residents of the affected geographical area, as opposed to the national and even global reach of the September 11 Digital Archive. Thus, despite their potential to elicit powerful emotional responses and occasional critical inquiry, these two online archives constituted an authentic reflection of existing inequities, rather than an authentic challenge to them.

Conclusion

Consumerism, Capitalism, and the Potential of Disaster

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig owned by British Petroleum (BP) exploded and sank in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers and breaking open a well one mile beneath the surface of the Gulf that began pouring between 1.5 and 2.5 million gallons of oil a day into the sea (CNN wire staff, 2010). For the next 107 days, BP crews, the U.S. Coast Guard, and scores of volunteers cleaned beaches, deployed oil containment booms, and worked to prevent more oil-related damage as BP sought first to cap the damaged well and then to plug the leak. The depth of the leak made the process of repairing the well and halting the flow of oil a painstakingly slow and frequently unsuccessful one, however, as various options failed or were halted due to bad luck, bad weather, or faulty technology. But after a summer mixed with both failure and incremental progress, on August 4 the Obama Administration held a press conference to announce that the "static kill" procedure of pumping mud and then cement into the now-capped well had worked to seal it and stop the flow of oil. The administration also announced that three- quarters of the leaked oil had already been captured on the surface, dissipated or otherwise dispersed (Achenbach and Mufson, 2010; Gillis, 2010). When all was said and done, the broken well and its rapidly leaking oil had dominated the news media and the national consciousness during the otherwise slow summer news season, and stirred widespread fears of ecological devastation.

Despite the positive pronouncements of relieved White House officials, the public still had reason to worry about the spill's long-term effects. Many Gulf coast residents refused to take

BP's and the White House's word on the amount of oil remaining in the water and about the degree of risk posed by the oil that did remain (Bluestein and Weber, 2010). Subsequent scientific tests seemed to prove these residents right; they suggested that as much as 80% of the oil remained in the Gulf, and confirmed that the sea floor was covered in oil for many miles around the spill site (Gutman and Blackburn, 2010; Gutman and Dolak, 2010). Even if the initial assessments had been correct, the amount of oil still remaining in the Gulf would have been much greater than the amount in Alaska's Prince William Sound during the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, and many Alaskan fisheries have yet to recover from that disaster (Klein, 2010). Thousands of birds and other animals died or were hurt in the days and weeks immediately after the BP spill, and the oil's damage to the larvae and eggs of crab, shrimp, and fish would not be known until at least the following summer (Gillis, 2010). Taking into account the Gulf of Mexico's incredible diversity and already fragile ecosystem, it is likely that many more animals will ultimately be hurt by the effects of this oil. Of the 1,728 species of plants and animals in the spill zone, 135 are unique to the area and 74 are already endangered; in many worst-case scenarios, the spill will permanently alter the marine chemistry of the Gulf to the point that many of these species will simply not survive (Hotz, 2010). Furthermore, the spill is estimated to do billions of dollars worth of damage to the fishing and tourism industries of the Gulf coast over the next several years as well (Oxford Economics, 2010).

Thus, as with other recent disasters, the deleterious effects of the BP spill are likely to persist longer than the attention of most of the national news media. One *Washington Post* story perhaps unwittingly revealed this dynamic:

> Analysts compared the spill's tarnishing of Obama's reputation to the damage Hurricane Katrina did to President George W. Bush's image. Both disasters tested presidential responsiveness and sensitivity. Unlike Katrina, however, the spill had staying power. Katrina came and went, leaving devastation behind, but the spill

> "is this ogre that keeps coming at us," one administration official said a few weeks into the disaster (Achenbach and Mufson, 2010, para. 14-15).

Though the residents of New Orleans and other communities that have yet to be fully rebuilt would certainly quarrel with the notion that Hurricane Katrina "came and went," this quote unwittingly reminds us that all disasters eventually lack "staying power" in contemporary media culture, and suggests that the Gulf oil spill will actually be no different.

Like most modern disasters, this one produced a variety of striking images. Photographs of the massive Deepwater Horizon rig burning and sinking into the ocean garnered early media attention, but the most iconic images came on June 3 when an Associated Press photographer took pictures of brown Pelicans and other seabirds covered in, and presumably dying from, a thick, brown coat of oil at Louisiana's East Grand Terre Island. Video footage of the birds soon followed on most major news networks. At a time when the potential environmental impact of the vast and uncontrolled leak was really just beginning to dawn on the American public, these images provided the first concrete proof of the toll that the oil was surely taking on a wide range of wildlife throughout the Gulf.

Although the American public did not initially watch this tragedy unfold in real time, and despite the fact that BP tried to restrict and control images of the disaster, members of Congress eventually received access to internal video feeds from BP's underwater rovers, which some of those Representatives then displayed to news networks without BP's permission (Peters, 2010). BP soon announced it would turn off this live video feed during its first attempt at a "top-kill" procedure, but relented under pressure from the White House (Werner, 2010). The resulting broadcast of what turned out to be a failed attempt to plug the leak was, in the words of one journalist, "an Internet smash" (Jonsson, 2010). Over one million people viewed the video embedded in PBS's website, and over 3,000 websites used the feed, which many television news

channels also displayed. Although this video feed lacked the drama or spectacle of other disaster footage discussed in this dissertation, its wide consumption nevertheless speaks to the continued public appetite for live footage of disasters, as well as the perceived authenticity of such footage. Even though it was frequently difficult to tell what was happening, besides the fact that oil was gushing out into the sea at an alarming rate, audiences trusted in the truth of these images far more than they trusted BP's or the White House's assessments of the leaking well or the progress of its undersea repair.

BP's initial attempt to withhold its own underwater footage of the spill was matched by attempts to block the access of journalists to sites where the oil had surfaced and reached land (Peters, 2010). When coupled with BP CEO Tony Hayward's numerous gaffes, which were heavily covered by a mainstream media more at home with stories on political missteps than hard-hitting investigative journalism anyway, the company took a public relations hit that resulted in lowered stock prices and a nationalist American backlash against the suddenly foreign *British* Petroleum company (Gross, 2010; Weber and McClam, 2010). Other forms of spill-related consumer culture reflected the company's poor public image as well, especially those generated through various forms of online prosumption. The Twitter account @BPGlobalPR attracted over 185,000 followers with its satirical spin on the company's poor image, posting tweets such as "Sadly we can no longer certify our oil as Dolphin Safe," and "As part of our continued rebranding effort, we are now referring to the spill as 'Shell Oil's Gulf Coast Disaster.'" In contrast, the company's actual Twitter account, @BP_America, had a mere 17,192 during that same period. The company CafePress, which prints logos and designs uploaded by web users onto t-shirts, mugs, bags, and other products, had over 2,000 BP-related designs for sale on over 70,000 possible products, most of which contained caustic or sardonic slogans

similar to those of the fake BP Twitter account. These include t-shirts with phrases like "give bp the bird" around a drawing of an oil-covered pelican, baseball caps reading "Save the Gulf" or bumper stickers that read simply "FUBP."

Much of the spill-related merchandise for sale at CafePress advocates boycotting BP, a sentiment with a strong presence in other online venues as well. The Facebook account Boycott BP had over 800,000 fans, the site BoycottBP.org boasted 29,000 unique visitors, and Public Citizen's boycott petition (http://www.citizen.org/boycott-bp) contained over 22,000 signatures. But the efficacy of such boycotts has also been called into question by many journalists and commentators. As Newsweek's Sharon Begley put it: "Just as buying green products is better for our eco-esteem than it is an effective way to save the planet, so consumer boycotts of the latest oil company to run afoul of public opinion are emotionally satisfying but ultimately futile" (Begley, 2010, para. 9). Indeed, competing oil companies who would likely benefit from a consumer boycott of BP gas have similarly poor records on environmental and human rights issues. Unlike other famous consumer boycotts such as the Montgomery, AL bus boycott that jumpstarted the civil rights movement, or the 1980s boycott of canned tuna that led to the adoption of dolphin-safe fishing techniques, few real alternatives exist for consumers who are concerned about the environmental effects of deep sea oil exploration and our general dependence on fossil fuels, since electric cars are not an affordable option for the bulk of consumers at this time (Begley, 2010).

As a result, public protests of BP and the oil industry in general took more symbolic, emotional approaches. For example, one organization called "Hands Across the Sand" (http://www.handsacrossthesand.com/) held an event on June 26 in which people gathered at beaches all across the country to join hands for 15 minutes as a show of support for "protection

of our coastal economies, oceans, marine wildlife, and fishing industry." Like the BP boycott, such events seemed geared more towards their participants' emotional well-being than towards addressing any concrete changes or policies. Indeed, one wonders whether the goals of protecting coastal economies and the fishing industry are at all compatible with the goals of protecting oceans and marine wildlife in any sense other than the symbolic. But, as with other forms of disaster consumerism described in this dissertation, the personal demonstration of empathy in the face of others' suffering is increasingly required, and participation in these sorts of symbolic protests is an effective marker of both empathy and sincerity. BP's CEO Tony Hayward faced heavy criticism for his perceived lack of empathy, especially after he infamously told the *Times of London*, "I want my life back" (quoted in Guarino, 2010). President Obama was also criticized early on in the crisis for failing to exhibit an appropriate level of emotional connection. One Associated Press reporter regarded that as a motive for the President's later public appearances: "Eager to demonstrate not just command but compassion, Obama invited relatives of the 11 oil workers killed in the disaster to meet him at the White House, where he cuddled the newborn baby of one of those lost. The $20 billion recovery fund helps Obama pivot from empathy to concrete problem-solving" (Benac, 2010, para. 18). Even monetary remuneration seems to require concurrent demonstrations of empathy today, lest it also be seen as insincere.

In these ways, the case of the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill fits the model of disaster consumption described throughout this dissertation. New media technologies were used to generate the most immediate, authentic footage of the spill—in this case, deep sea cameras were deployed for a live feed of underwater robots trying to fix the leaking oil pipe. Perhaps due to the fact that the initial rig explosion and sinking did not produce the kinds of spectacular and

undeniably authentic live media moments associated with other disasters, and definitely due to a lack of demonstrable empathy on the part of corporate and government spokespeople, the public quickly lost trust in the risk claims of authorities surrounding the spill. That did not, however, render the whole disaster inauthentic in the public's view—footage of dying marine life and interviews with affected fishermen and the families of the deceased oil rig workers were enough to motivate many exercises in empathetic consumption, as well as the consumption of products and media with angry or sarcastic anti-BP sentiments.

For most of us, this sort of consumption remains the most readily available means to publicly express our feelings about tragedies, disasters, and the suffering of others. Seen in that light, the consumption of disaster is ultimately an expression of powerlessness. Following a disaster through the maelstrom of cable television news cycles, buying a t-shirt, attending a concert, texting a donation, watching a documentary, or visiting a disaster site: all these behaviors simulate a kind of agency over catastrophes that in reality eludes us. In this way, the empathic ideal behind many forms of disaster consumption reveals itself as an illusion of agency that makes us feel better about our real helplessness in the face of mass tragedy, at least until the next disaster comes along to throw that sense of agency once again into doubt. This marks authenticity as a particularly paradoxical cultural criterion, despite its popularity. Certainly disasters are deeply real, with terrible consequences that can be felt by victims, seen by spectators, and measured by reporters, scientists, and government officials. But despite our best efforts to make them so, disasters are not tangible phenomena that can be captured, packaged, and sold, at least not without doing harm to the very qualities that made them real or genuine in the first place. As consumers of disaster, we risk chasing this chimera of authenticity into some dark and disorienting places, filled with as much deception as reality.

One of the deceptions encouraged by disaster consumption is the notion that individual consumption choices can effectively ensure one's safety from future risks and threats. The "consumerism of security" (Sturken, 2007, p. 79), which became so visible after the attacks of September 11, allowed consumers to attempt to take their protection into their own hands. Such security-minded consumption often proves wrong-headed, however, and may actually exacerbate risks. Moreover, by its very nature, this sort of retrospective consumption of security is doomed to fail, since it is geared towards disaster scenarios that have already happened and are therefore very unlikely to be repeated. That is the case with the various types of executive parachutes that appeared on the market after 9/11, which are not proven to work and may deter people trapped in skyscrapers from using fireproof staircases or other more realistic escape methods. In a different context, fears of environmental pollution and unsafe tap water have spurred spectacular growth in the sale of bottled water over the past quarter century, which has ultimately produced massive amounts of plastic waste that is highly detrimental to the environment (Szasz, 2007). Americans also frequently keep guns in their homes as a form of protection, despite the fact that those with firearms in the home are at much greater risk of homicide or other violent death (Kellerman et. al. 1993; Cummings et al, 1997). Similarly, the ease with which Americans can purchase firearms makes mass shootings like the massacre at Virginia Tech more likely (Kellner, 2008). And if we think of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as a kind of product that was marketed and ultimately sold to the American public after 9/11 on the grounds that it would make us safer, it seems clear that this consumption of security has also backfired, as these conflicts have spurred anti-American rage across the globe and inspired more recent acts of terrorism (Greenwald, 2010). Thus, attempting to consume one's way to safety and security can have a variety of disastrous consequences.

On the other hand, American society continues to showcase a profound lack of risk-aversion among its elite decision-makers, at least in part because ignorance of risks is so profitable for those in positions of power. As former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer put it:

> It's a depressingly familiar story: A company hides enormous risk in its effort to get outsize returns, hoping that if and when the risk metastasizes, somebody else will have to pick up the tab. The name of the company may change, the sector of the economy may differ, but the basic narrative is as predictable as a Hollywood sequel. Our two recent cataclysms—the financial meltdown of the past several years, and the more recent eco-disaster in the Gulf of Mexico—follow this pattern (Spitzer, 2010, para. 1-2).

Like the giant financial companies whose "too big to fail" status assured them of government bailouts when the wild profits from their riskiest trading schemes dried up and their debt quickly turned toxic, BP's status as the largest oil producer in the United States, as well as its astounding $66 million per-day rate of profit (Graham, 2010), have guaranteed that it will continue to thrive after the spill, which may not be the case for the Gulf's ecosystem and many of its coastal economies.

Nonetheless, understanding the individualistic cultural and political context in which disaster consumption takes place today makes denunciations of those who engage in it seem patently unfair. As consumers, we are tasked with purchasing our own safety and security from risk, despite the aforementioned ways in which consumer society often generates or exacerbates those same risks. This is necessarily an anti-social proposition, since securing oneself also means shifting the threat to others, which is "a task that prompts self-concern, while rendering solidarity unreasonable if not suicidal" (Bauman, 2008, p. 21). Since consuming one's own security has emerged as the norm, it has become an increasingly large gamble to throw in one's lot with that of one's neighbors and community. Zygmunt Bauman has explained the results of this individualistic ideology: "Whatever happens to an individual can be retrospectively interpreted

as further confirmation of their sole and inalienable responsibility for their individual plight—and for adversities as much as successes" (Bauman, 2008, p. 22). This individualism often intersects with older forms of discrimination based on class and race, but provides a new way to blame the victims of inequality and structural racism. Such was certainly the case during Hurricane Katrina, when the city's evacuation plan based on access to private transportation predictably failed the many low-income residents who did not own automobiles (Bartling, 2006). Though decades of uneven development and terrible urban planning left many poor, minority residents stuck in the city as the hurricane approached, those residents were demonized in the storm's aftermath for not driving out of the city and then for "looting" much-needed supplies from flooded or abandoned stores.

Individuals are also urged today to perform and maintain an attractive, authentic, and even saleable form of selfhood in the face of increasingly unstable family situations and labor markets (Bauman, 2007). Self-help books, management guides, and psychotherapists frequently emphasize multiperspectivalism and empathy (Illouz, 2008). These trends converge during catastrophes, when news media and popular culture make the suffering of others a common public topic of discussion that requires our attention and our demonstrations of empathy, lest we appear insensitive to families, friends, employers, or potential love interests. As the empathetic gaze becomes embedded in more forms of media and the norm of empathic spectatorship ascends, the lack of a strong, personal, emotional response to any mass-mediated American tragedy is increasingly likely to reflect poorly on individual consumers, just as it does for corporate spokesmen and government officials. In this way, the requirement that disaster-related products and texts be authentic has fed back onto the consumers of those products and texts themselves.

When all is said and done, however, the atomistic properties of consumerism make it a poor answer to disaster. Empathy may reflect well on us as individuals, but it does little to repair damaged infrastructure, and it will not bring back lost lives. And while empathetically motivated donations of money or time do help, those still suffer from a reactive, backward-looking perspective that ensures the next disaster is as likely as ever. If, for instance, the record-setting amount of money raised in the wake of the Haiti earthquake does prove to be enough to rebuild that country, it will still be stuck in the same geopolitical situation with the same post-colonial forms of oppression that made it so vulnerable to the effects of an earthquake in the first place. In contrast, the recent decision by the IMF, World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank to forgive $1.2 billion of Haiti's debt will likely make a much greater difference than all those charitable donations in terms of staving off future suffering there (Schaaf, 2009).

The Haiti case should remind us that, ultimately, governments and global financial organizations can respond to disasters and plan to forestall future catastrophes much more effectively than individual consumers, provided they make the right kinds of plans and responses. Green consumerism will be a niche market, or an empty marketing ploy, unless new laws require many more products to become green, and unless regulatory agencies stringently enforce such laws. Hybrid, hydrogen, or electric cars will never replace gasoline-powered automobiles until manufacturers and consumers are compelled by law to switch. Cities like New Orleans will be rebuilt only in the interest of developers who plan to gentrify its best locations and shut out its poorest residents unless the federal government takes a more pro-active role in the process, and does so in ways that take into account the input and concerns of its poor and working class citizens. This is, of course, in direct contrast to the way the American government actually operates in the current political moment, dominated by neo-liberalism and its related

privatization schemes. Yet until these conditions change, the consumerism of security will resemble a kind of "political anesthesia" (Szasz, 2007, pg. 195) that diminishes one's sense of risk and reduces the sense of urgency to make political demands about the alleviation of potential hazards. And until those conditions change, the benefits of vicarious, empathetic consumption will manifest primarily for the individual consumer, not for those suffering others to whom that empathy is directed.

The BP oil spill did manage to generate some public debate about the disastrous nature of that particularly cherished American commodity. But despite the huge opportunity that the spill provided for environmental groups to highlight the problem of global warming and the high economic and ecological costs of fossil fuels, public opinion polls taken after the spill found little change in the percentage of people worried about climate change (Fahrenthold & Eilperin, 2010). One poll about American energy policy taken three months after the spill showed slightly more support for "keeping energy prices low" than for "protecting the environment from the effects of energy development and use," though both options were heavily supported (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010, August 2). These results seem to suggest that, when push comes to shove, the American public is not, as a whole, ready to change its consumption habits on the hope that doing so might forestall ecological disaster. Of course, government legislators and major corporations also refuse to take much meaningful action to cap carbon emissions and on other important environmental matters, leaving one to wonder why the public should be willing to make the kinds of sacrifices that major polluting industries and their well-lobbied representatives in government are not.

History has shown, going back at least as far as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, that elites frequently use disasters to consolidate power and eliminate dissent. But 50 years of disaster

sociology have also highlighted the innumerable ways in which residents of disaster-stricken communities act with kindness and compassion towards one another, even under the most harrowing of conditions. As Rebecca Solnit put it:

> The joy in disaster comes, when it comes, from that purposefulness, the immersion in service and survival, and from an affection that is not private and personal but civic: the love of strangers for each other, of a citizen for his or her city, of belonging to a greater whole, of doing the work that matters. These loves remain largely dormant and unacknowledged in contemporary postindustrial society: this is the way in which everyday life is a disaster (Solnit, 2009, p. 306).

Perhaps, then, what distant consumers express when they sit glued to the television watching a disaster replayed over and over, when they buy t-shirts or snow globes, when they mail teddy bears to a memorial, or when they tour a disaster site, is a deep, maybe subconscious, longing for those age-old forms of community and real human compassion that emerge in a place when disaster has struck. It is a longing in some ways so alien to the world we currently live in that it requires catastrophe to call it forth, even in our imaginations. Nevertheless, the actions of unadulterated goodwill that become commonplace in harrowing conditions represent the truly authentic form of humanity that all of us, to one degree or another, chase after in contemporary consumer culture every day. And while it is certainly a bit foolhardy to seek authentic humanity through disaster-related media and culture, the sheer strength of that desire has been evident in the public's response to all the disasters, crises and catastrophes to hit the United States in the past decade. The millions of television viewers who cried on September 11, or during Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, and the thousands upon thousands who volunteered their time, labor, money, and even their blood, as well as the countless others who created art, contributed to memorials, or adorned their cars or bodies with disaster-related paraphernalia—despite the fact that many knew no one who had been personally affected by any of these

disasters—all attest to a desire for real human community and compassion that is woefully unfulfilled by American life under normal conditions today.

In the end, the consumption of disaster doesn't make us unable or unwilling to engage with disasters on a communal level, or towards progressive political ends—it makes us feel as if we already have, simply by consuming. It is ultimately less a form of political anesthesia than a simulation of politics, a Potemkin village of communal sentiment, that fills our longing for a more just and humane world with disparate acts of cathartic consumption. Still, the positive political potential underlying such consumption—the desire for real forms of connection and community—remains the most redeeming feature of disaster consumerism. Though that desire is frequently warped when various media lenses refract it, diffuse it, or reframe it to fit a political agenda, its overwhelming strength should nonetheless serve notice that people want a different world than the one in which we currently live, with a different way of understanding and responding to disasters. They want a world where risk is not leveraged for profit or political gain, but sensibly planned for with the needs of all socio-economic groups in mind. They want a world where preemptive strategies are used to anticipate the real threats posed by global climate change and global inequality, rather than to invent fears of ethnic others and justify unnecessary wars. They want a world where people can come together not simply as a market, but as a public, to exert real agency over the policies made in the name of their safety and security. And, when disaster does strike, they want a world where the goodwill and compassion shown by their neighbors, by strangers in their communities, and even by distant spectators and consumers, will be matched by their own government. Though this vision of the world is utopian, it is not unreasonable, and if contemporary American culture is ever to give us more than just an illusion

of safety, or empathy, or authenticity, then it is this vision that we must advocate on a daily basis, not only when disaster strikes.

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