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ADORNIAN ETHICS FOR THE DIGITAL ERA

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by Jaime Schwartz*

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin

Theodor Adorno directly addressed the ethics of aesthetic response to historical trauma, famously stating that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”^[1] With these immortal words, Adorno is not condemning all aesthetic expression but rather the notion that art is transcendent and that traditional aesthetic forms can persist without acknowledging the occurrence of tremendous suffering, as represented synecdochically by Auschwitz. Moreover, *only* art can adequately express suffering; the barbarity lies in works that transfigure or, worse, deny its occurrence. For Adorno, who developed his ‘after Auschwitz’ dictum over a nearly twenty-year period beginning in 1949, the past is only accessible through the lens of the present. Therefore, past and present, as well as history and memory, must always be constellated within the work of art in order to turn toward that suffering.

That being said, we must acknowledge that we now occupy quite a different present from the one in which Adorno was writing. Although Adorno’s “ethic of representation”^[2] has significantly informed aesthetic responses to catastrophic history since its initial postulation in the wake of World War II, Gene Ray’s paper entitled “Conditioning Adorno: ‘After Auschwitz’ Now,” notes the current “necessity of historicizing the category ‘after Auschwitz.’”^[3] That is, Adorno’s ethic was framed in response to a certain set of circumstances that are no longer consistent with the way in which traumatic events are received today: “Adorno’s ethic formulated an urgent response to catastrophic history in the context of European postwar reconstruction culture. But as history continues to unfold in a more intensely globalized context, this post-war response cannot be hypostatized or imposed indefinitely.”^[4] In this globalized context, both the volume of information and the speed with which that information is disseminated and consumed has increased dramatically. What we think of as traditional boundaries, whether national, linguistic, or otherwise, are no longer as relevant as they used to be. Technologies of digital reproduction and their multiple channels of distribution complicate visual representation to the point that we must approach Adorno’s question of ethics in a different way. This essay discusses the ethics of aesthetic response to mass trauma in relation to the terrorist attacks on New York’s World Trade Center of September 11, 2001,^[5] which remain the most highly mediated event of this kind in recent history. I would like to suggest that, thanks to rapid digitization and globalization, the way in which trauma is experienced in the twenty-first century is fundamentally different from the pre-digital era; therefore its aesthetic expression must be considered differently. In particular, I turn to German conceptual artist Hans-Peter Feldmann’s *9/12 Front Page* (2001) and discuss how this artwork constitutes an example of an aesthetic response to collective trauma well suited to the digital era, in that it assists viewers with organizing the cognitive disjunctures that arise as a result of 9/11’s hyper-mediation, rather than simply acknowledging their existence.

Trauma, in the psychoanalytic sense, is characterized as, “an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.”^[6] The experience of trauma is most prominently characterized by incomprehensibility, disallowing the subject to accurately conjure a clear picture of the event or even to reconstruct its timeline. In creating his nine-hour film *Shoah* (1985), director Claude Lanzmann took as his ethical paradigm what he terms a “refusal of understanding.”^[7] Although counterintuitive, Lanzmann explains that works seeking to engage with traumatic history must transmit the occurrence of that trauma without offering analysis because this type of event is fundamentally incomprehensible. Implicit in Lanzmann’s postulation is a direct connection between the acts of seeing and knowing: To see an image of the Holocaust is to claim to know it and, therefore, to deny its magnitude. However, Georges Didi-Huberman points out that for Lanzmann this approach functions both as ethical compass and as an operational reality because “*there were no images* of the specific—extreme—reality to which his film was dedicated.”^[8] As a historical event, the Holocaust was quite literally unimaginable due to the scant existence of photographic documentation.^[9] While the Nazis went to great lengths to suppress the visual imaging of the genocide they were perpetrating, by contrast, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were planned with media in mind. How, then, does the question of ethics change when we are able to so clearly conjure a picture of what was previously deemed too unfathomable to begin to imagine in any all-encompassing way? We have all seen images of 9/11, but that does not change the fact that it is a fundamentally incomprehensible event. Beyond proffering description, how can artistic output help us reconcile the disjuncture between memory, reality, and representation *now*—when the cognitive process of understanding has become untethered from the visual act of seeing as a result of our inundation with images?

Roughly two billion people, approximately one-third of the earth’s population in 2001, watched the 9/11 attacks unfold live and in real time via a diverse array of media.^[10] It is a day remembered as much through amateur photographs and videos, taken on cell phones and other readily available devices, as through images captured by professional photographers and camera crews. Journalist David Friend points out that two new technologies implemented by the broadcast media around the close of the twentieth century enabled the rapid and detailed visual transmission of 9/11: “The first breakthrough was satellite newsgathering (via digital video cameras, space-based satellites, and fiber optics), linked to a matrix of local TV stations, and national and international networks. The second development was the rapid transmission of digital news “photographs.”^[11] After the first plane struck the North Tower at 8:46 a.m., news crews immediately flocked to the site, so that by the time the second plane made impact at 9:03 a.m., cameras were rolling and aimed directly at the Towers. In an unprecedented turn of events, shocked news anchors provided live color commentary as the second plane hit.

Ruminating on the relationship between media and the attacks, Jacques Derrida speculates, “What would ‘September 11’ have been without television?... More than the destruction of the Twin Towers or the attack on the Pentagon, more than the killing of thousands of people, the real ‘terror’ consisted of and, in fact, began by exposing and exploiting, having exposed and exploited, the image of this terror by the target itself.”^[12] The immediate broadcast of the attacks by its victims, he suggests, was complicit with the attacks’ core purpose of mass traumatization through unprecedented death and destruction. As the experience of trauma cannot be fully processed as it is lived, the typical response is to repress the memory of the traumatic event, whether in part or in full. In the Freudian schema, trauma is allayed through the tripartite analytic process of remembering, repeating, and working through. Yet, as suggested by Derrida’s comments, in the case of 9/11, the traumatic experience assumed a different structure thanks to its atypical immediacy.

In their book *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, which brings together a number of essays on this theme, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg explain that “something particular to the visual experience of 9/11 was its instantaneity, meaning not just alacrity of perception but compression of narrative time into a much less elastic visual moment, namely, the immediacy of live television. What is distinctive here is the seeming disallowance of the deferral of experience.”^[13] With 9/11, the event itself came to be inseparable from its visual representation. Saltzman and Rosenberg continue, “The key issue here is repetition as verification of the traumatic. Even before the repetitions of instant replay, repetition was the very logic of the event.” That is to say, when the second plane struck the South Tower, essentially a repetition of the strike on the North Tower 17 minutes earlier, it instantly became clear that the first crash was an act of aggression and not some bizarre accident. Therefore, Freud’s prescribed process of recovery through repetition—the aim of which is to allow the subject to eventually both fill in gaps in memory and overcome resistances due to repression^[14]—is manifest in the event itself. Saltzman and Rosenberg conclude, “That we came to see this event over and over in instant replays of live television only further evacuated the very psychic possibility of internal representation through repetition compulsion so unavoidable to the registering of traumatic experiences. The unavoidability of the visual representations of the event drew repetition outward and made the very work of witnessing into the experience of trauma, as opposed to a mode of its therapy.”^[15] That is to say, the experience of trauma on 9/11 is inextricably bound up with its visual transmission, executed in an ad hoc yet stunningly detailed manner. Typically, repetition is a key process for working through a traumatic occurrence—for giving it order and understanding—but in the case of 9/11, this possibility was abjectly abrogated.



Hans-Peter Feldmann, 9/12 Front Page, 2001. Installation view.

Feldmann’s *9/12 Front Page* (2001) confronts this problem of immediate and incessant repetition head on. This installation brings together the front pages of one hundred newspapers from around the world from the morning of September 12, 2001, each bearing a headline and a photograph describing the attacks. They are presented perfunctorily, arranged in a grid, without any intervention or commentary on the part of the artist. Curator Nancy Spector explains, “the instantaneity between the catastrophic event and its broadcast worldwide disallowed the time lapse between perception and apprehension that is critical to the psychic process of registering and overcoming a trauma. This phenomenon is rehearsed in Feldmann’s extreme archive of on-the-spot 9/11 coverage.”^[16] Although reported in a multitude of different languages, “picture after shocking picture reinstate the horror, collectively emulating the repetitious return to the original scene that the defines the effects of trauma.”^[17] By means of the structure of the work, Feldmann enacts the repetition compulsion through which trauma is typically allayed. Whereas disparate media images viewed on the day of the attack may be fleeting, easily jumbled and confused in the minds of those watching, Feldmann confronts the viewer with the central fact—that the unspeakable has occurred—over and over. No matter the language, it is clear that all newspapers bear the same—previously incomprehensible—news. Okwui Enwezor suggests that the repetition of these images without commentary (framed within the context of news media) presents the viewer with more questions than it answers: “Have the images become emblematic more of the aftermath than of the event itself? How does one revisit, not the event itself, but its aftermath, its mediatized manifestation?” and “Do the fluttering sheets of newspaper illuminate the dark events of September 11, or do they banalize and ultimately diminish their projected impact? Is September 11 principally a media event for the global public?”^[18] While these are questions that Feldmann does not intend to answer, asking them in the first place constitutes the more important gesture.



Hans-Peter Feldmann, *9/12 Front Page*, 2001 (100 newspapers, dimensions variable). Detail.

Enwezor similarly situates Feldmann's practice in general and this work in particular as being "concerned, first, with photography's social and political meaning in the context of public culture, and, second, with the disjuncture between the ubiquity of the photographic image as it developed a private cult of commemoration, and the evacuation of meaning that ensued as photographic images become empty signs."^[19] That is to say, his work mines the way in which we receive images today in order to comment on society more generally. By mimicking the way in which news is received in the digital environment with *9/12 Front Page*, Feldmann confronts the viewer not with the fact of the tragedy, but rather with its effects, thus successfully opening up a space for contemplation and, ultimately, working through.

T.J. Clark suggests that, in the twenty-first century what has traditionally been called 'print capitalism,'^[20] or the streamlining of communication that originated with the invention of the printing press and made possible a new way of envisaging global and national networks, has been displaced by a new mode of 'screen capitalism,' in which "print and image and map and diagram are made available to individual users in what seems an equalized and immensely speeded-up field of symbolic production."^[21] As a result of this new system, traditional categories of experience are broken down: "Screen capitalism is dissolving the very structure of private (public) being-together. It is wrecking the quiet simultaneity of clock-time. Atrocity happens NOW. The 'now' that language inevitably conjures away into repeatability and abstraction, the image preserves for ever in what seems to be its mere being."^[22] One problem with this state of affairs that has yet to be adequately addressed is the state of apathy that often arises as the result of the constant barrage of images and their increased urgency. Moreover, what of all the atrocities that we don't see on television? While the traditional boundaries to disseminating information might no longer be relevant, we are now faced with a new set of considerations in their place. Similarly, the question of ethics in respect to aesthetic response to these numerous collective traumas remains in flux. As Gene Ray suggests, the only answer might be a case-by-case consideration: "while general-level critical criteria are indispensable points of reference, the ethics of artistic practice [now] needs to be judged case by case, taking into account, as fully as possible, a work's multiple and shifting contexts of reception."^[23]

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^[1] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, (New York and London: Continuum, 1982), 312.

^[2] In Gene Ray's definition, "an ethic of representation is made up of strictures and propositions that would guide, not necessarily in a merely rote or formulaic way, writers, artists, and thinkers in representing what they thematize. It suggests that certain forms and practices are more or less appropriate for certain contents and that the reasons for this are in the end ethico-political." Gene Ray, "Conditioning Adorno: 'After Auschwitz' Now," in *Terror and The Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 148.

^[3] Ibid., 149.

^[4] Ibid., 150.

^[5] These attacks have come to be colloquially known and widely referred to as '9/11.' For the purposes of this paper, I will limit myself to a discussion of 9/11 vis-à-vis a discussion of the two airplanes that were commandeered by terrorists in order to attack the World Trade Center in New York City. While these were not the only affronts to U.S. security made that day—a third plane was commandeered and used to attack the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and a fourth crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania when the passengers resisted the terrorists' efforts—the coordinated attacks on the Twin Towers were simultaneously the most destructive and the most visible.

^[6] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Trauma." In *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973), 465.

[7] Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 204.

[8] *Ibid.*, 92.

[9] Didi-Hubermann goes on to argue—quite convincingly—against Lanzmann's paradigm of unimaginability. He maintains that four recently surfaced photographs from the crematorium at Buchenwald testify to the horrific reality of the Holocaust simply through their existence at all and *in spite of* their fragmentary exposition of the historical reality.

[10] David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006), 32.

[11] Friend, *Watching the World Change*, xii.

[12] Giovanna Borradori, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 108.

[13] Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, "Epilogue," in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, eds. Saltzman and Rosenberg (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 272.

[14] Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 148.

[15] Saltzman and Rosenberg, "Epilogue," 273.

[16] Nancy Spector, "After the End," in *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance*, eds. Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), 167.

[17] *Ibid.*, 167.

[18] Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography and Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008), 29.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] 'Print capitalism' is theorized in full by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

[21] T.J. Clark, "In a Pomegranate Chandelier," *London Review of Books*, 28, no. 18 (2006), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n18/tj-clark/in-a-pomegranate-chandelier> (accessed March 24, 2012).

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Ray, "Conditioning Adorno: 'After Auschwitz' Now," 151.

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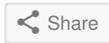
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