

Alice Balestrino

Dramatic History/Historical Drama

Staging 9/11 as Aristotelian Tragedy

Abstract

This article intends to inquire the official narrative of the 9/11 terrorist attacks exhibited at the 9/11 Memorial Museum as a mise-en-scène of a tragedy according to the definition theorized by Aristotle in his Poetics. Indeed, the 9/11MM stages a master narrative of the attacks that frames the historical reconstruction and nurtures the memorial endeavor on the basis of Aristotle's unity of time and place; predominance of performance over narration; explicit distinction between heroes and villains; and the inspiration, in the spectator, of the empathic feelings of fear and pity ultimately leading to the catharsis. In turn, this enactment may be read as the apex of the "us vs. them" rhetoric, inaugurated by President Bush in the wake of the attacks and subsequently endorsed by other politicians and the media alike.

Keywords: *post-9/11 rhetoric, 9/11 Memorial Museum, Aristotle's Poetics*

*Yet surely to die with kleos [glory]
is a grace [kharis] for mortals.
(Aeschylus, Agamemnon, v. 1304)*

A few days after the September 11 attacks, in a New York Times article entitled "Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers," Edward Rothstein blames postmodernism—understood as an "intellectual and moral perspective"—for its latent "moral relativism" and its consequent failure to adhere to "the transcendent ethical perspective [...] cried out by the [9/11] destruction" (2001). By resorting to the category of transcendence, Rothstein brings in an almost Kantian framework¹ for an event that, he suggests, entails an epistemological failure because it goes beyond human knowledge (this the literal meaning of transcendence); hence, this phenomenon necessitates an ethical suspension. This transcendent ethical response to the World Trade Center attacks is in line with a national sentiment, first

¹ I am referring here to Immanuel Kant's classical theory of knowledge, developed in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

boosted by President George W. Bush in his Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People held on September 20, 2001. In this occasion, President Bush famously asserted: “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (2001); an ultimatum that defined 9/11 within a Manichean system of moral absolutes.

Against this rhetorical and political background, this article proposes an interpretation of the narrative of the 9/11 terrorist attacks exhibited at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum (9/11MM; dedicated in New York City on May 15, 2014) as the epitome of this “orchestration and amplification,” carried out by both the government and the media, of dogmatic, transcendent responses in the wake of the event (Jameson 2003, 55). In particular, I argue that the account of 9/11 that the 9/11MM shows may be profitably investigated as a *mise-en-scène* of a dramatic tragedy according to the classical categories outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: explicit definition of moral opposites, predominance of performance over narration, prominence of the cathartic process triggered by the emotions of pity and fear, and unities of place, time and action. Given this narrative’s focus on the visitors’ emotional response and its clear-cut moral scope overshadowing the historiographical intent, I will contend that the 9/11MM deliberately privileges the memorial part over the museum and turns the historic drama of 9/11 into a dramatic history.

Following President Bush’s claims, New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, in his Address to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Terrorism, on October 1, 2001, championed this same dichotomous morality asserting that “on one side is democracy, [...] on the other is tyranny and [...] mass murder. We’re right and they’re wrong. It’s as simple as that. [...] And the terrorists are wrong and, in fact, evil in their mass destruction of human life” (2001).

The rhetoric of the us vs. them, exemplified by statements such as “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” “we’re right and they’re wrong” was promptly echoed by several critics, such as Julia Keller in the *Chicago Tribune*² and Roger Rosenblatt in the *Time*, thus slowly taking root in the national consciousness. Particularly, in his piece “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” Rosenblatt insists on the necessity to end “the age of irony,” identified as a period “roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright,” in which “nothing was to be believed or taken seriously. Nothing was real” (2001). In other words, Rosenblatt dismisses the postmodern perspectivalist stance as morally irresponsible and he foresees (in fact, wishes for)

² Keller, Julia. “After the Attack, Postmodernism Loses Its Glib Grip.” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 September 2001.

a reassessment of contemporary intellectual discourse along more serious and rigorous (or maybe transcendent?) lines.

Fredric Jameson defines the political and mediatic representation of 9/11 in these terms as “the media hype, and the subsequent media patriotism” aiming at “crystalliz[ing] all kinds of intense and troubled feelings” in a “collective unanimity.” Interestingly, Jameson always resorts to the Aristotelian principles of pity and fear (which the Greek philosopher theorized in his *Poetics*) in order to explain the ideological construction surrounding the events of 9/11. In this sense, Jameson contends—and I situate the present analysis along these lines—that the “collective spectacle” and the “collective fantasy” that mediate the social perception of 9/11 and, consequently, frame its narration can be considered pre-modern in their cultural naiveté and ethical simplicity. Moreover, their scope, grounded in the affective sphere, further demonstrates their social objective of creating a homogeneous reaction across the American public:³

It is not particularly difficult to grasp the mechanics of a collective delirium of this kind, and of what we may technically call a collective fantasy without meaning to imply in any way that it is unreal. Aristotle already described it, in accounting for the peculiar effects of a unique collective spectacle of his day. Pity and fear: fear comes from putting myself in a victim’s place, imagining the horror of the fire and the unimaginable height outside the windows; pity then sets in when we remember we are safe ourselves, and think of others who are not. Add to all this morbid curiosity and the soap opera structure that organizes so much of our personal experience, and you have a powerful vehicle for producing emotion, about which it is difficult to say when it stops being spontaneous and begins to be systemically used on the public. (2003, 57)

This Aristotelian narrative of 9/11 silences potential critical reflections into a unique, collective fantasy that informs the national consciousness of the terrorist attacks as fruition of a kind of spectacle, leading to the psychological reactions of pity and fear, compassion and removal. This kind of discourse turns 9/11 from dramatic event into drama theatrically staged; a tragedy that

³ In their essay “Groundzeroland,” Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe also quote Aristotle’s *Poetics* with reference to his “theory of the transformative power of representation,” according to which “when an object is relocated from the place in the world where it has its pain-giving being to the realm of an artistic medium, where it is ‘reproduced’ as an image, the pain-giving object becomes pleasurable because we are spared direct interaction with the thing itself. We may merely contemplate it” (2003, 98-99). The Aristotelian reading of post-9/11 cultural responses is also supported by Jeffrey Di Leo and Uppinder Mehan, when they claim that the centrality that the word “terror” acquires in post-9/11 discourses may recall “Aristotle’s view that a good tragedy ‘must imitate actions arousing fear and pity.’” Also, they expand the Aristotelian significance to the notion of “*phobos*” with reference to the “pain or agitation” linked to terror (2012, 12).

is ideologically loaded and whose narrative mechanisms belong to the emotional sphere of the nation, rather than to its cognition. Therefore, the Aristotelian categories of pity and fear, characteristics of classic Greek tragedies, seem to define “the emotional reaction” surrounding “the real historical event” of 9/11, within an ecology orchestrated and amplified by the media (2003, 55).

The introduction of a master narrative of the 9/11 events has been also read as part of the “state fantasy” of the American loss of innocence at Ground Zero. Donald Pease, in *The New American Exceptionalism*, defines a “state fantasy” as “the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagine their national identity”⁴ (2009, 1), and he argues that the act of reimagining American national identity after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been developed through and in a national narrative of the events that “demand[s] [a] spectacle of the destruction of a homeland as compensation for the loss of the land’s ‘virginity’” (2009, 178). This discourse represents a new stage of the state fantasy of the American Exceptionalism and it interplays with Jameson’s insistence on the effects on the collectivity of this narrative calling for ideological homogeneity. Indeed, considered within the framework of American Exceptionalism, President Bush’s rhetoric has been described as epideictic, often resorting to “religious topoi (‘we come before God to pray’) as well as eulogistic themes (suffering loss, feeling sorrow, missing the dead) to define and express the nation’s collective anguish” (Hubanks 2009, 215).

In the months following Rothstein’s accusations, several intellectual figures responded to his stance against postmodernism. Among them was Stanley Fish, who produced a compelling analysis of the cultural debate sprung in the 9/11 aftermath in two separate articles: “Don’t Blame Relativism,” in *The Responsive Community*, and “Postmodern Warfare” in *Harper’s Magazine*. Fish reasons on the criticism towards postmodernism in terms of criticism towards particularism; by resorting to general abstractions such as “evil,” he holds up, contemporary 9/11 national rhetoric fails to problematize the event, and to shed light on its historical particularities. His argument confronts the supposed impossibility, given postmodernist assumptions, for “one culture, particularly the West” to “reliably condemn another” (as maintained by Rothstein), on these terms:

[I]t depends on what you mean by “reliably,” a word that takes us right back to “objective” [...]. If by “a reliable condemnation” you mean a condemnation rooted in a strong sense of values, priorities, goals, and a conviction of right and wrong, then such a condemnation is available to most if not all of us all the time. But if by “a reliable condemnation” you mean a

⁴ Pease, in turn, borrows this concept from Jaqueline Rose (see Jaqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*, 1996).

condemnation rooted in values, priorities, and a sense of right and wrong that no one would dispute and everyone accepts, then there is no such condemnation, for the simple reason that there are no such universally accepted values, priorities, and moral convictions. [...] The threat to the general is posed by Postmodernism [...] because its critique to master narratives deprives us of a mechanism for determining which of two or more fiercely held beliefs is true. (Fish 2002, italics in original)

The postmodern intention to present alternative narratives, complementing and challenging the official one, is hence perceived as disturbing in that it questions the dominant cultural constructs that legitimize a transcendent consensus view—claimed as universal—that furthers collective unanimity and ethical uniformity. Trying to establish historical complexities over smooth generalizations, postmodernism is thus dismissed as un-patriotic because it relativizes the absolute, moral standards, rooted in “a sense of right and wrong that no one would dispute and everyone accepts” (“we’re right and they’re wrong”) and that reaffirms national conformity and discourages dissent (Fisher 2002).

In fact, the national sentiment towards 9/11, boosted by President Bush’s epideictic rhetoric, holds up the idea that “our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil” (Bush 2001, “Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service”) although this fear rhetoric does not “address what ‘ridding the world of evil’ would specifically entail, nor does it outwardly invite audience debate” (Hubanks 2009, 215). Borrowing Fish’s words, this kind of discourse disregards historical particularities for the sake of a Manichean understanding of history.

It is within this context of inflated and dogmatic rhetoric that the 9/11 Memorial was dedicated in 2011 and the 9/11 Museum followed in 2014. I argue that these two memorial architectural enterprises perfectly fit in the exceptionalist state fantasy of Ground Zero in that they are backed by and, in turn, back the ethical uniformity and moral absolutism championed by the 9/11 national discourse. In particular, Aristotle’s reflections presented in his *Poetics* may represent a profitable lens for reading and analyzing the narrative strategies employed at the 9/11MM in order to recount the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The relevance of Aristotle’s tragic principles to the post-9/11 rhetoric is amplified and materialized in the narrative exhibited at the 9/11MM.

The site of the National 9/11MM is composed of two areas. The “Memorial” part consists of a “Memorial Plaza” where two reflecting pools, the “Memorial Pools,” have been placed within the footprints of the Twin Towers. These pools contain the largest manmade waterfalls in North America and are surrounded by bronze parapets where the names of the victims (of both the 2001 attacks and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing) are engraved. This section was

designed by Michael Arad with Peter Walker⁵ and dedicated on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks; according to Arad, the pools represent “absence made visible,” because although water flows into the voids set at the bottom of the pools, they can never be filled (911memorial.org). The “Memorial Plaza” is scattered with oak trees and accommodates also the 9/11 Memorial Glade⁶ and the pavilion of the 9/11 Museum.

The latter was designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta (for the aboveground entry) and by the Manhattan-based firm Davis Brody Bond (for the belowground exhibition spaces), replacing Daniel Libeskind who had originally won the competition in 2003.⁷ Dedicated four years after the memorial, the museum is a glass and steel pavilion with a deconstructivist design and an asymmetric shape resembling a collapsed building. The museum is divided in several areas; my analysis will focus on the narratives staged at the two main and permanent exhibitions: the “Historical Exhibition: September 11, 2001,” and the “Memorial Exhibition: In Memoriam.”⁸

After going through the security checkpoints—that could arguably be considered a proper introduction to the phenomenology of 9/11—the 9/11MM displays a number of symbolic remnants from the Twin Towers: for instance, two rusted iron tridents that supported the structures, and the original wall that retained the Hudson River during the attacks and has remained intact ever since. As the visitors leave the lobby area and descend below ground, where the exhibit spaces are, they proceed through an escalator that is sided by a ruined flight of stairs down which many of the survivors fled after the attacks. Hence, the 9/11MM introduces visitors into a realm where the remnants of the past are integrated and made relevant to the present experience of the visit. In fact, in this underworld the relics of the pre-9/11 era, “the gut-wrenching fragments” that survived the attacks “are treated like Richard Serra sculptures, elevated into art objects with ghoulish glee, in a way that’s not entirely easy to stomach” (Wainwright 2014). This recourse to elements affecting the emotional sphere of the visitors,

⁵ In 2003, New York City developers launched an international competition for designing the 9/11 Memorial. Israeli architect Michael Arad won the competition with its project *Reflecting Absence*, and he was encouraged to collaborate with landscape architect Peter Walker. In the end, the architects involved in the project of the whole World Trade Center site were: Daniel Libeskind (master plan), Davis Brody Bond (underground museum), Snøhetta (above pavilion), Michael Arad (9/11 Memorial), and Peter Walker (museum plaza area).

⁶ The “Memorial Glade” is dedicated to all who “are sick or have died from exposure to toxins in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks” (911memorial.org).

⁷ Libeskind eventually planned the construction of the One World Trade Center (also known as Freedom Tower) in the new World Trade Center complex, where the 9/11MM also is. The Freedom Tower, whose height of 1,776 feet pays homage to the Declaration of Independence, accommodates mainly office spaces.

⁸ The historical exhibition was designed by Layman Design, whereas the memorial exhibition was conceived by Thinc Design in collaboration with Local Projects.

rather than their cognitive system, is in line with President Bush's epideictic rhetoric, as well as with its subsequent mediatic transpositions. Ultimately, the visitors' psychological engagement and performative involvement is a key aspect of the memorial ecology of the 9/11MM in the monumental spaces as well.

Belowground, visitors arrive to the largest sections of the Museum, Memorial Hall and Foundation Hall, located respectively between the footprints of the original Twin Towers and beside the North Tower footprint. In Memorial Hall, two artworks are on display: a quote from Virgil "No day shall erase you from the memory of time" (on which I will return), forged from recovered World Trade Center steel by Tom Joyce; and a mosaic made up of 2,983 (the number of the victims) paper panels surrounding the quotation, installed by Spencer Finch and titled "Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning." Walking past the first hall, visitors reach Foundation Hall, an almost empty space where the Last Column, "the final piece of World Trade Center steel to be removed from Ground Zero [...], in a ceremony marking the official end of the recovery period," stands out. This column is 36-foot and is covered with "inscriptions, mementos, and signatures."⁹

In line with the abundance of "gut-wrenching fragments" and emotional inputs, the presence of the Last Column is moving and inspires in the audience the emotions of pity and fear that ultimately lead to the cathartic effect of purification from these same sentiments. In this regard, the scope of a dramatic history turned into a historical drama may be to enable the observers to exorcise these sentiments within an institutional, and thus normalized and properly indoctrinated, context, rather than expressing them in a more independent and possibly rational way. As Aristotle contends:

what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others, [...] those who heighten the effect of their words with suitable gestures, tones, dress, and dramatic action generally, are especially successful in exciting pity: they thus put the disasters before our eyes and make them seem close to us. (2008)

Therefore, considered through this Aristotelian lens, the visit to the 9/11MM seems to serve the double purpose of re-remembering (re-affirming one's membership to the post-9/11 national rhetoric) while re-moving, i.e. re-positioning the memorialization of the September 11 attacks from personal, intellectual consciousness (liable for differing perspectives) onto a universal, standardized projection. Therefore, this supposedly transcendent narrative of 9/11 favours a

⁹ <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/museum/about-museum>. Last visited 02/06/2020.

pre-modern understanding of the events, based on the antonyms of good and evil; an unambiguous moral system that mirrors the state fantasy of Ground Zero.

At the 9/11MM, a clear-cut distinction between good and evil, heroes and villains, is created by a combination of vague generalizations regarding the attackers—i.e., the villains—and the meticulous individualization of the victims and first responders, i.e. the heroes. This curatorial choice may be interestingly read against the background of Aristotle's assertions on tragic characters; indeed, the Greek philosopher maintains that characters "must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences); it follows that we must represent men either as better or as worse than in real life" (2008).

The villains are presented at the "Historical Exhibition," namely the gallery where the major events of that day are recounted, accessible from Foundation Hall. The nineteen attackers are here introduced by a panel reporting their names with a small photograph of each of them; they are subsequently portrayed in videos while going through the airport security checkpoints in the early morning of September 11. All this evidence is produced without any proper historical contextualization, a matter that is committed to the much criticized, seven-minute long video called "The Rise of Al-Qaeda." This documentary was denounced by the museum's interfaith advisory group of clergy members because they agreed that its biased tone and incautious use of terms such as "Islamist" and "jihad" would offend Muslims and their faith. It is an "overgeneralization issue": as noted by Akbar Ahmed (the chairman of the Islamic Studies Department at the American University in Washington), the problem with using such a blurred terminology is that "most visitors are simply going to say Islamist means Muslims, jihadist means Muslims" (Otterman 2014).

The dangerous association of the terrorists' religion with what they did may automatically blame "by association, one and a half billion people who had nothing to do with these actions and who ultimately the U.S. would not want to unnecessarily alienate" (Otterman 2014). The advisory board suggested the museum officials undertake changes but, as of 2019, the video is being screened without any modification. On a wall of the same gallery the letter left behind by some of the hijackers is posted without an English translation; a choice that prevents the visitor from having a first-hand reading of the letter and leaves the sources of the terrorists' fanaticism undefined, thus sharpening one's feeling of estrangement and confirming the historical vagueness characterizing the exhibition.

By reducing the historical figures of the 9/11 attackers to tragic villains driven by the archetypal force of evil, generalization operates on the level of de-historicization; in Fish's words, "if we

reduce the enemy to the abstraction of Evil, we conjure up [...] a shape-shifting demon beyond our comprehension” (Fish 2002), a transcendental evil. Relegating the enemies from the historical ground to the abstractions of a mysterious realm that cannot be rationalized, the 9/11MM master narrative presents the attackers as villains emerging from a prehistoric darkness that precludes any cognitive engagement, any understanding, on the part of the visitor.

Not only morally but also physically separate from the terrorists, the victims’ memorialization is not included in the “Historical Exhibition” but is displayed in the Memorial Exhibition “In Memoriam,” whose entrance is located in Memorial Hall. With their historicity being, in turn, removed, the victims’ and rescuers’ characterization aspires to be once more a-historical and, in fact, dramatic. This further abstraction not only portrays the victims as moral role models but, mostly, invests them with an aura raising them to the status of extra-ordinary human beings, that is as heroes. In this gallery, as in the Historical Exhibition, the visitor’s epistemological experience is grounded in the realm of non-rationality, particularly affecting the emotional sphere and fostering the doctrine of cultural homogeneity seeking univocal responses. This exhibit relies on the visitor’s multi-sensory involvement, presenting an almost synesthetic encounter with the day of September 11 and the lives it took. Each of the nearly 3,000 casualties is introduced by a picture hung in the “Wall of Faces,” and in the gallery’s hallways there are touchscreens allowing the visitor to learn more about each person by showing other photographs and personal objects.

Moreover, the heroes’ names are read aloud, perpetually, recalling the classical epic tradition of the so-called “catalogue of heroes”: a formal record of the heroes included in epic poems, such as Homer’s *Iliad*. On the one hand, this memorial practice is in dialogue with other commemorative endeavors of dramatic histories—think, for example, of the Hall of Names at the Yad Vashem (“The World Holocaust Remembrance Center”) in Jerusalem, where 600 photographs of Holocaust victims are displayed; or of the Days of Remembrance organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum around the country, in which “names readings” are routinely held. On the other hand, the redundancy of this catalogue—the names read aloud, the pictures, the bronze panels with the names surrounding the “Memorial Pools,” the individual descriptions—immerse the visitor in an overtly personal and emotionally heightened context while, at the same time, creating a cognitive disorientation.

Interestingly, the idealization of the victims as epic heroes is explicitly suggested at the Memorial Foundation, where a miscontextualized quotation from Virgil’s *Aeneid* dominates the wall opposite the Remains Repository: “No day shall erase you from the memory of time.” In the

original work, this statement refers to Nisus and Euryalus, two Trojan bloodthirsty warriors who, having ambushed the sleeping enemies, are in turn killed by a troop returning to their camp. These two characters were deceitful soldiers, brutal killers, not innocent victims and in this discrepancy between the supposed significance of the quotation (paying homage to innocent victims) and the real literary reference in Virgil's text seems to lie a hint to the lack of critical thinking and intellectual engagement typical of 9/11 ideological discourse. In other words, facts are narrated through abstract messages—disengaged from their original histories and hence turned into dramatic elements—that are effective in emotional terms, without deeper considerations.

Both the otherworldly aura and the synesthetic effect of the catalogue of heroes are stressed by the exposition of common, personal objects turned into mementos. Enshrined in glass display cases and spot lit, these items dramatize the momentousness of the event in connection with the ordinariness of everyday life. Shoes, pumps, wallets, glasses, telephones, credit cards, the bullhorn used by President Bush to address the rescue teams working at recovery operations are only a few examples of the nearly 800 articles on view at the museum. Among other critics, Christopher Hawthorne of *The Los Angeles Times* problematizes this “literalism of the mundane,” which he perceives as “rob[bing] visitors of the chance to meaningful personal reflection” (Hawthorne, 2014). Within the abstract, heroic framework, every victim is individualized, over-particularized, in sharp contrast to the plain over-generalization that informs the villains' characterization and in contrast also to the visitors' experience since they are deprived of “meaningful personal reflection,” i.e. of their memorial agency. Characters are in any case over-stated, ideologically loaded, leaving no room for counter-narratives.

The abundance of sensory and emotional inputs overwhelms the scant stream of information and by employing an axiological vocabulary that turns neutral signs into signifiers and empowers a dogmatic symbolism, the master narrative at the 9/11MM fulfils one more precept from Aristotle's *Poetics*: the principle of predominance of performance over narration. According to this category that Aristotle identifies as foundational of the tragedy, “the scene of suffering [...] staging death or bodily agony” is key (2008). Through the display of ordinary objects, the use of real-life recordings and the staging of concrete items that the visitors can touch (such as a smashed fire truck or the rusted columns) the *mise-en-scène* succeeds in being “an imitation of an action that is serious and complete,” while the plot has “the form of action, not of narrative” (2008). The memorial visit is, once again, synesthetic because besides the mementos to see and the remnants to touch, the halls of the “Historical Exhibition” resonate with the contemporary TV and radio coverage of the attacks.

Crucially, the very voices of the victims are part of the exhibit, which plays their last phone calls and taped messages.¹⁰ This dramatization encourages the visitor to respond to this 9/11 rhetoric as in front of a spectacle, becoming hence a spectator involved in an emotional rather than cognitive process, and thus committing the intelligibility of this historical event to the irrational sphere. By showing the victims' faces, voices, personal stories and objects, this discourse spurs the visitors' empathic identification with the dead and encourages the cathartic feelings of pity and fear. Spectators are urged to be emotionally involved: tissue dispensers are all around, relieving the moved and making the others feel as outcast, alienated from the orchestrated response.

Two more considerations regarding the interpretation of this narrative of the 9/11 events as Aristotelian tragedy come to the fore. The first pertains to the Aristotelian axiom of "unity of time": as the philosopher notices, a proper tragedy "confine[s] itself to a single revolution of the sun" and indeed the 9/11MM focuses almost exclusively on the day of the attacks. Reflecting the established pattern of de-historicization, the exhibition presents 9/11 as a single, tragic moment extrapolated from the complexity of history. Despite being over-articulated—it is chronicled by an interactive timeline detailing 39 different moments, from 5.45 a.m. (when the hijackers passed through security in Portland) to 8.30 p.m., the time when President Bush addressed the nation—the day of 9/11 appears to be frozen in time. The Memorial Museum logo itself (with the eleven figure recalling a pause button); the crushed ambulances and fire trucks; the shop covered with ash and dust from the collapse of the Towers; the wrenched personal objects: all these pieces are displayed to signify that time stopped at Ground Zero, that since then chronology has not been the same. In this new world, time has been split into a "pre-9/11" and a "post- 9/11," but the relationship between these two distinct temporal dimensions and the occurrence separating them is not solidly discussed, only vaguely suggested. A symbol of this fixation of time may be seen in Todd Beamer's (a passenger on Flight 93) watch that, in his

¹⁰ As noted by Amy Sodaro, in her work on the politics of memorial museums, at the 9/11MM the

most powerful and affective [part] is the audio. The soundtrack to the exhibit is a clamor of voices of victims, family members, survivors, talking heads, and witnesses to the event. There are screams and shouts of disbelief, sirens wailing all around, incredulous newscasters [...], and the voices of the victims themselves in the voice mail messages they left [...]. [T]estimony is an intrinsic and essential part of all memorial museums, but no others offer the voices of the victims who no longer have a voice, and the effect is deeply affective. If one wants to delve emotionally deeper, there are other moving and affective recordings and testimonies in the alcoves set off from the main exhibit, with signs warning of the 'disturbing material' inside and podiums holding tissues discretely tucked into corners. (2018, 148-149)

father's words reported in a New York Times article, "still tells the time in a sense, but only one time" (Trebay 2014).

Emotionally captivated by this "one time," the spectator seems to be prevented from considering the whole picture by looking before and beyond that day. As for the post-9/11 period for example, there are few, brief references to the bombings in Madrid in 2004, in London in 2005, and in Bali in 2002. The main stages of the War on Terror are briefly outlined, but a separate section of the museum, the exhibition "Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden," inaugurated five years after the other exhibits, at the end of 2019, addresses the search for Bin Laden. This multi-media account of the intelligence and military decade-long activity that led to the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 is based on declassified documents and seems to attend to and fill a void in the 9/11MM narrative. Itself relying on artefacts and videos, it may perform a shift from President Bush's epideictic rhetoric, centred on the present like the other exhibitions, to a more deliberative rhetoric that projects onto the future the necessity to pragmatically respond to the attacks.

This more recent exposition also broadens the geographical scope of the 9/11MM, moving from Lower Manhattan to Pakistan. However, the failure to take into account the deep ramifications of the attacks persists and eventually circumscribes the museum's metaphorical spatial dimension to a trait that is once again in consonance with one of Aristotle's precepts: the "unity of place." The narrow representation of the event still adheres to the mono-perspective paradigm that portrays enemies coming from a not-specified "outside," with geographical coordinates not matched by historical contextualization.¹¹ In this sense, the first analogy coming to mind is the underworld: with its underground location, its aura of epic deaths, and its remoteness from worldly temporal and spatial orders, the 9/11MM seems to obey to the same dynamics as the afterlife. Both the unity of time and the unity of place, hence, contribute to the self-referential nature of the museum's narrative and the phenomenological framework within which visitors move.

The parallel drawn in this article between the narrative of the 9/11 attacks displayed at the 9/11MM and the main categories of the Aristotelian tragedy implies the reading of the former as the apex of President Bush's fear rhetoric and of the mediatic orchestration of the state fantasy of Ground Zero. As I have discussed above, the emphasis on the cathartic feelings of fear and pity, the characterization of the victims as epic heroes and of the hijackers as plain villains,

¹¹For a comprehensive analysis of the part dedicated to "After 9/11" of the Historical Exhibition, with particular focus on the question, tucked into this part of the exhibit, "How Can America Protect Its Citizens from Terrorism?" see Sodaro 2018, 151-153.

the unities of time, place and action that concur to de-historicize and de-problematize the account of the events are all narrative strategies that transpose a dramatic history into an historical drama relying on the emotional sphere of the audience. This latter assertion is relevant to and consistent with the scope of a memorial enterprise; however, when it comes to the historical perspective that a museum should provide, it becomes more complicated and even perilous. Joel McKim, building on Alain Badiou's meditation on the relationship between art and philosophy in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, contends that the memorial pertains to Badiou's "classical schema," which the French philosopher associates with Aristotle. The memorial, according to this theory, is a form exemplifying art's essential connection to the realm of catharsis, rather than the realm of knowledge; "[i]ts purpose [being] neither cognitive nor revelatory, but therapeutic" (McKim 2019, 45).

The memorial, hence, is defined by its therapeutic scope intrinsic in the cathartic effect; this affective trait is coherent with the remembering intent of the memorial as a technology of remembrance. However, when the museum, as a mode of understanding the past more than remembering it, is juxtaposed to the memorial, identifying the scope of this architectural enterprise becomes more problematic. Does it concern art or knowledge? If "the 'therapeutic' function of the 9/11 memorial [...] necessarily undermines the didactic and static quality" that supposedly root the historical purpose of the museum (Stubblefield 2015, 164), what is the function of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum? These questions, I believe, interplay with the narrative that is ultimately displayed: a dramatic version of history. As Adam Gopnik perceptively noted: "what happened on 9/11 was a crime deliberately committed in open air as a nightmarish publicity stunt, one already as well documented as any incident in history. We can't relearn it; we can only relive it. This means that, if there is an absolute case for a memorial, the case for a museum is more unsettled" (2014). In the case of the Aristotelian tragedy staged at the 9/11MM, the alleged aim of re-learning is presented through exhibition installations that pursue instead a re-living of 9/11 as a form of spectacle.

Alice Balestrino holds a Ph.D. in American literature from "Sapienza" University of Rome. Her dissertation *"Extra-Vacant Narratives. Reading Holocaust Fiction in the Post-9/11 Age"* elaborates on the concept of vacancy as a reading strategy for Holocaust uchronias and autofictions published in the aftermath of 9/11. Among her research interests are Holocaust literature and postmemory, alternate histories, post-9/11 fiction, narrative strategies for the representation of memory in American literature.

Works cited

- 9/11 Memorial & Museum. <https://www.911memorial.org/> All websites last visited on 05/03/2020.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher, 2008. www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm.
- Bush, George W. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People." United States Capitol: 20 September 2001. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>.
- . "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service." Hospital Center: 14 September 2001. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2001-book2/pdf/PPP-2001-book2-doc-pg1108.pdf>.
- Craven, Jackie. "About Arad's Design for the National 9/11 Memorial." *ThoughtCo*, 02 September 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/arads-design-9-11-memorial-178129>.
- Di Leo, Jeffrey R. and Uppinder Mehan. "Introduction. Theory Ground Zero: Terror, Theory, and the Humanities after 9/11." *Terror, Theory and the Humanities*. London: Open Humanities Press, 2012. 11-34.
- Fish, Stanley. "Don't Blame Relativism." *The Responsive Community* 12.3 (2002): 27-31.
- . "Postmodern Warfare." *Harper's Magazine*, July 2002: 33-40.
- Giuliani, Rudolph. "Address to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Terrorism." New York: 1 October 2001. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/>
- Gopnik, Adam "Stones and Bones." *The New Yorker*, 7 July 2014.
- Hawthorne, Christopher. "At 9/11 Memorial Museum, A Relentless Literalism." *The Los Angeles Times* 26 May 2014. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-911-museum-review-20140526-column.html>.
- Hubanks, Joshua. "Praise, Blame and Advocacy. An examination of President George W. Bush Post-9/11 Discourse and the Rhetorical Genres that Define It." *intersections* 10.2 (2009): 199-225.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The Dialectics of Disaster." *Dissent from Homeland. Essays after September 11*. Edited by Frank Lentricchia and Stanley Hauerwas. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 55- 61.
- Kimmelman, Michael. "Finding Space for the Living at a Memorial." *The New York Times* 28 May 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/arts/design/finding-space-for-the-living-at-a-memorial.html>.

- Knoll, Corina. "What Happens to the Heartbreaking Tributes Left at the 9/11 Memorial." *The New York Times* 9 September 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/09/nyregion/9-11-memorial-museum.html>.
- McKim, Joel. "Agamben at Ground Zero. A Memorial without Content." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25.5 (2008): 83-103.
- . *Architecture, Media, and Memory: Facing Complexity in Post-9/11 New York*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.
- Otterman, Sharon. "Film at 9/11 Museum Sets Off Clash over Reference to Islam." *The New York Times* 23 April 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/24/nyregion/interfaith-panel-denounces-a-9-11-museum-exhibits-portrayal-of-islam.html>.
- Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Recuber, Timothy. *Consuming Catastrophe: Mass Culture in America's Decade of Disaster*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016.
- Rojas, Rick. "Unsung 9/11 Heroes Finally Get Their Own Memorial." *New York Times* 30 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/nyregion/sept-11-memorial-nyc.html>.
- Rosenblatt, Roger. "The Age of Irony Comes to an End." *Time* 24 September 2001.
- Rothstein, Edward. "Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers." *The New York Times* 22 September 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/arts/connections-attacks-us-challenge-perspectives-postmodern-true-believers.html>.
- . "Defining Evil in the Wake of 9/11." *The New York Times* 5 October 2002. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/05/books/defining-evil-in-the-wake-of-9-11.html>.
- Sodaro, Amy. *Exhibiting Atrocity. Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Stubblefield, Thomas. "The Failure of the Failure of Images: The Crisis of the Unrepresentable from the Graphic Novel to the 9/11 Memorial." *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 153-178.
- Sturken, Marita. "The 9/11 Memorial Museum and the Remaking of Ground Zero." *American Quarterly* 67.2 (2015): 471-490.
- . "The Objects that Lived: The 9/11 Museum and Material Transformation." *Memory Studies* 9.1 (2016): 13-26.
- Treby, Guy. "A Moment in Time Captured in Pieces." *The New York Times* 13 August 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/fashion/a-moment-in-time-captured-in-pieces.html>

Wainwright, Oliver. "9/11 Memorial Museum: An Emotional Underworld beneath Ground Zero." *The Guardian* 14 May 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/14/9-11-memorial-museum-new-york>.