Book Review

Engle, Karen. 2009. *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the visual imagination*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

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Karen Engle tells us her book is about how 9/11 has been visually remembered. As such, she traverses the terrain of ghosts, memory and history. At the outset Engle draws from Angela Carter's novel, *Nights at the Circus*, detailing the story of an enterprising nineteenth century medium-photographer-con-artist who invites grieving relatives to séances with the promise of conjuring images of their recently departed child. A hazy image of a young girl appears in the séance, and the artist obliges the relatives with a photograph of an alternate child, Mignon, whom parents all too eagerly embrace as a true image of their beloved. Engle invites us to consider a similar function being performed by the twin towers in the years since 9/11. "Just as Mignon becomes detached from her own bodily context, circulating through the narratives, memories, hopes, and fears of others, the twin towers have been bidden to stand in for any number of causes and losses over the past seven years" (p. 8). It is the task of *Seeing Ghosts*, to trace these "spectral emergences" (p. 8).

Given the centrality of imagery both to initial reports of the plane attacks upon the World Trade Center, and to the many visual efforts involved in mourning, remembering, and memorialization in the aftermath, there are many forms of "spectral emergence" traced in *Seeing Ghosts*. A critical theme pursued throughout the text involves theoretical reflection on responses to trauma, the necessity of mourning, and the processes involved in properly traversing through states of grief. Drawing heavily from the works of theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, amongst many others, Engle uses their insights to frame her interrogation of the relation of the visual to mourning and to making history.

Engle's choice of 9/11 visual representations and ephemera is a definite strength of the book. After claiming that statements of methodology make her nervous, Engle admits to choosing images "punctum-like," in the Barthesian sense; the images struck her (p. 6). She moves through a seemingly disparate collection of 9/11 visual representations and objects, including sculpture, memorials, news and forensic photography, postcards, FBI mug shots, cartoons, Osama Bin Laden voodoo dolls, and the vast array of souvenirs and memorabilia so prolific as a means of remembrance, mourning and group identity. One is never certain of the pathway Engle will create as she weaves her way through the narrative. Present-day representations are linked to their moorings in the historical past. For example, highlighting a 9/11 postcard with the text "You Never Walk Alone," Engle traces the history of this phrase to its origins in the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, "Carousel." Readers are then probed to consider the varying meanings of "You Never Walk Alone," moving from the sentimentality of its origins, to a more sinister embodiment in the post 9/11 surveillance state, where "never" intersects with both the encouraged surveillance of fellow citizens and official surveillance by the state.

In the first two chapters Engle focuses upon representations deemed inappropriate to the task of national mourning. In a chapter devoted to the bronze sculpture, *Tumbling Woman*, by New York artist, Eric

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Fischl, Engle ponders reactions of horror that followed the sculpture's appearance on the sidewalk of Rockefeller Center, depicting a woman about to hit the ground. Engle queries the ethics involved in the disciplining of public space when this piece was deemed too offensive and inappropriate to constitute a monument, and analyses the subtle ideological differences embodied in the building of monuments versus memorials. While not always agreeing with Engle's propositions for why *Tumbling Woman* was received with such horror, I appreciate the sculpture's categorization as a "counter-monument." Just as monuments function to celebrate and fix official memory, counter-monuments provide tangibility to loss, representing the future as a kind of haunting and unknown terrain (p. 27).

Similarly, in a chapter entitled *Falling Man*, Engle questions why, on this most photographed day, images of people jumping from the twin towers were deemed taboo. Engle examines the parameters of a morality of looking quickly imposed upon both newsmakers and news viewers, through an intensive regulation of photographers by the state. Through chronicling the actions of many involved in news making, it is apparent that corpse photographs were quite willingly avoided by photographers, editors and news audiences. However, we know there were many photographic images that achieved widespread approval in the immediate days of the tragedy, and Engle points us to images of bodies alive, heroic, and purposeful. As with Mignon, it is the twin towers themselves that will function to metaphorically stand in for the absent bodies. In a very interesting shift, Engle moves to a site where photographs of body parts did end up receiving widespread attention and circulation. Utilizing Derrida's argument of the necessity of the processes of identification and naming for the act of mourning, Engle discusses the Fresh Kills landfill that was created on Staten Island, and the extraordinary efforts at naming that were undertaken. Importantly, the forensic project was extensively photographed and subsequently made into an exhibition.

A strong theme running through the book is the "bubbling up of historical memory" (p. 6), as Engle illustrates the many ways America's involvement in previous wars inflects the present. From postcards featuring Uncle Sam standing in the former place of the World Trade Center, ready to fight the terrorists, to a photograph widely circulated, featuring three firefighters erecting a flag in a manner befitting Iwo Jima, to the use by *The New York Times* of retouched Norman Rockwell paintings from World War II, Engle points to a simplified narrative of good and evil accompanying the use of these historical referents as means for understanding September 11th.

A particularly rich discussion is entailed in "The face of a terrorist." Beginning with the challenges to the state represented by the initial elusiveness of the terrorists (who *are* they?); to the discovery that one was American, Engle illustrates the photoshopped need to transform John Walker Lindh from Caucasian American to unclean Eastern savage in popular representation. Sexualized images, featuring genitals in general and anal penetration in particular, abound in cartoon renderings of America's relation to Osama Bin Laden. However, in the midst of intense maleness, Engle reminds us that women were utilized to justify American responses of violence, through the dichotomous uses of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England. Engle positions the rescue of the white Jessica Lynch from the evil Arab other as laying claim to American narratives of the righteousness of their occupation of Iraq and the need for warfare. Conversely, photographs of Lynndie England, the female soldier featured in the infamous images released from Abu Ghraib, allow her recasting as the "perverse dominatrix." In a manner befitting the trial of those responsible for the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, England's scapegoating permits the perpetuation of state power, as the Bush administration is able to further deny its own role in the systemic perpetuation of such violence.

In understanding the popular in the context of responses to national trauma, Engle turns her attention to the tremendous generation of kitsch (souvenirs and memorabilia) that immediately followed the 9-11 attacks. Citing Michael Taussig's claim that one can see "the spinal column of the nation" (p. 128) reflected in the popular, a World Trade Center key ring reflects a state of melancholia, with the incorporation of a bit of the object of trauma directly into tourists' lives. 9-11 t-shirts, on the other hand, function as "symbolic object[s] of public declaration" (p. 134), further perpetuating group formation and us-and- them dichotomies.

Engle's book is a rich theoretical exploration of one of the most significant events marking our current period. How this event has been rendered visually is critical in contextualizing citizen and state responses in the years that have followed, as both the popular and the official tell us much about how mourning and remembrance will take place, what will be remembered, and how the past will be taken into the future.