Introduction:
9/11 as Catalyst – American and British Cultural Responses

More than eight years after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, literary and cultural studies criticism on “9/11” has predominantly come to the conclusion that the events have not brought about the historical, political, and cultural caesura that many commentators had predicted in the immediate aftermath – and that the Bush administration relied on in its introduction of various domestic and foreign policy measures in response to the perceived national and international security crisis. As David Holloway argues in his ideological history of the representation of 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ in the years 2001 to 2006, the notion that 9/11 was a moment of historical rupture is not tenable:

Contemporary discussions about the causes and outcomes of 9/11 […] were usually couched in explanatory frameworks, terminologies and styles, which had deep roots in American and Western cultural and intellectual history. At times there was an undeniably strong revisionist current in contemporary thought and culture. Yet wherever one looked in the post-9/11 era what was most striking was the absence of clean breaks. (Holloway 2008, 4)

However, what the events of 9/11 did bring about was a catalytic effect, especially in the fields of politics and culture. Holloway’s survey of responses to 9/11 in the political arena, in the mass media, in cinema, literature, photography, and the visual arts is only one illustration of the fact that 9/11 accelerated and reinvigorated discussions and debates that had for quite some time been public issues. In the realm of (inter)national politics, the problem of how to respond to al-Qaida terrorism and transnational Islamist insurgency, for instance, had been a pressing issue all through the 1990s and now gained renewed urgency; in the realm of literature and culture, the debate about the “end of irony” and postmodernism – already losing some momentum at the turn of the millennium – was strongly reenergized in the context of loudly voiced demands to tell the 9/11 experience ‘as it really was.’

Ultimately, in the U.S. as well as in Britain, the catalytic effect of 9/11 has by now produced a large corpus of textual/cultural representations that allow us to identify a variety of aesthetic and thematic responses. In various media and in various genres the challenge to represent and thereby make sense of and contribute to the political and cultural discourses on 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ has been met and
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has certainly led to a diversification of narratives that are participating in the processes of dealing with personal trauma and forming a collective cultural memory. As a growing number of collections of essays on the literary response to or “after” 9/11 reveals, the events have been particularly catalytic in the field of literature (see, for instance, Keniston / Quinn (2008); Irsigler / Jürgensen (2008)). While the essays in Keniston and Quinn’s collection focus on American and British literary representations in diverse genres, others address the development of American literature since the beginning of the millennium and, partly, try to gauge the impact of the post-9/11 novel on this development (Domsch 2008). Yet others place post-9/11 cultural representations in the contexts of larger discourses and media responses (Lorenz (2004); Poppe, Schüller, and Seiler (2009)), or take a distinctly global perspective (Cilano (2009)), or a more narrow comparative approach (see, for example, the essays in Irsigler and Jürgensen which put emphasis on the German and Anglophone response). What becomes obvious in the collections listed here is that at the center of critical interest has been the novel; representations of 9/11 and its aftermath in poetry, drama, or in the realm of popular music still deserve more comprehensive critical attention.

Unquestionably, the number of literary texts addressing 9/11, and here especially the number of novels published in its aftermath, has been steadily growing, and, unsurprisingly, first attempts at categorizing fictional texts have been made. Despite his own qualms about “[c]lassifying a[n] [ermergent] literary genre” (Holloway 2008, 107), Holloway for instance acknowledges “a striking set of themes, motifs and literary forms […] regularly and distinctively enough to be considered generic” (ibid.). He discusses a number of what he terms “early 9/11 novel[s]” (ibid.) that present the recent history as a traumatic experience and revolve around narcissistic collective, as well as individual self-reflections and narrative interiorization, sublimation, and repression. Also focusing on trauma in post-9/11 novels, Christina Rickli goes one step further and introduces a more nuanced categorization that distinguishes between three subgroups: texts that incorporate 9/11 as a subversive, traumatic element that is never directly alluded to but haunts the text as an inscribed memory; texts that allude to 9/11 as an element of narrative distortion without allowing it a larger narrative space; and those texts that directly deal with 9/11 (Rickli 2009, 107-9).

The essays collected in this special issue of ZAA respond to the overall picture of literary and cultural studies criticism on post-9/11 texts provided here in two ways. On the one hand, the essays by Sascha Pöhlmann and Christian Schmidt address genres and media – American poetry and American popular music – that have not yet received the comprehensive critical attention they deserve; on the other hand, the essays by Silvia Schultermandl and Georgiana Banita target a key issue of post-9/11 novelistic representation – the complex issue of the effects and meanings of visualizations of 9/11 – in innovative ways.

Pöhlmann’s contribution widens the perspective on post-9/11 literature to the genre of poetry and investigates the specific representational and imaginative potential the genre can make use of, especially if compared to the novel. Although he
questions the validity of a post-9/11 genre as such, he acknowledges the catalytic effect of 9/11 on the literary and cultural production at large. Pöhlmann argues that just as poetry’s lesser dependence on narration allows for a different, ultimately thematically and theoretically more complex approach to the much discussed issues of representation and reality in the aftermath of 9/11, the genre’s preoccupation with language fosters the general exploration of how to “imagine in language in this world.” Following his key question, “if and how the rules of what can or should be said in language have changed, and by whom, and to what ends” after 9/11, Pöhlmann introduces three post-9/11 poems – Stephen Gunn’s villanelle “Grudges” (2002), Anna Rabinowitz’s highly formalized L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem “Bricolage: Versicolor” (2002), and Ann Lauterbach’s graphic poem “Hum” – as exemplary texts that overcome the limits of representational language and narration in the wake of 9/11.

In his essay, Schmidt addresses U.S.-American popular music. He first comments on Cornel West’s claims that the recent history of terror in the U.S. should be compared to the historical experience of African Americans and that Americans in general ought to learn how to constructively mourn by appropriating the form and mode of the Blues. He then continues by analysing five well-known post-9/11 songs and one post-9/11 album, Brooks & Dunn country song “Only in America” (2001), Bon Jovi’s pop/rock song “Undivided” (2002), Toby Keith’s country song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” (2002), Steve Earle’s “John Walker’s Blues” (2002), Bruce Springsteen’s album The Rising (2002), and The Nightwatchman’s “No One Left” (2007). In his analyses he draws on Judith Butler’s call for a shared human experience of vulnerability and on Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy of the Self.

Schultermandl’s essay investigates an issue that has been centrally at stake in critical – more often than not theoretical – discussions of the global popular imaginary ever since 9/11, namely the cultural impact that the visual representations of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the collapsing of the towers, and the emerging cityscape that was covered in soot and debris have had. In her discussions of Claire Messud’s The Emperor’s Children (2006), Jay McInerney’s The Good Life (2006), and Don DeLillo’s Falling Man (2007), she draws attention to a thematic and performative ‘turn to the visual’ in novelistic post-9/11 production. Schultermandl shows that this ‘visual turn,’ the incorporation of ekphrastic detail, operates both on the level of story, for instance in terms of character development, and on the level of participation in wider cultural discourses such as that on the relationship between fiction and ‘the real.’

The role of visual representation also assumes central importance in Banita’s essay. Her discussion of Pat Barker’s Double Vision (2003) highlights the link that this novel draws between 9/11 and war journalism – a link that suggested itself immediately after the first photographs of the site of destruction at Ground Zero had been broadcast around the world. Crucially at stake in Banita’s argument are attempts to formulate an ethics of representing violence and war. Drawing on Michael Ignatieff’s notion of an ‘internationalization of conscience,’ but especially
on Martha Nussbaum’s (literary) ethical concept of ‘catalepsis,’ Banita provides an intricate reading of how Barker’s novel comprehensively explores the reach and the limitations of human empathy and compassion.

Works Cited

Cilano, Cara, ed. (2009). From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US. Amsterdam: Rodopi.


