
Sven Cvek. *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive.*

Jelena Šesnić



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9835>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9835

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Jelena Šesnić, "Sven Cvek. *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive.*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 14, Online since 24 May 2012, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9835> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9835>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Sven Cvek. *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive*.

Jelena Šesnić

REFERENCES

Rodopi: New York, Amsterdam, 2011. Pp. 271. ISBN: 978-90-420-3378-8. E-Book ISBN: 978-94-012-0076-9

- 1 In order to appreciate the intricacy of the author's argument, first we have to outline at least two ideological positions in relation to the events which occurred in the States some eleven years ago. The one perspective would render the events as a shattering and paradigm-changing rupture (and this is in part the subject of the book's chapters where trauma theory is the principal mode of reading). The other position is less dramatic, in a sense that it looks at the event as being the end point of the long 1990s and thus coming as the climactic point of the story of global communism's collapse and the end of the Cold War, on one hand, and placing of the United States more in synchrony with the corresponding events in countries worldwide, on the other. In that sense, as states the author, the event is less "eventful" as one-time occurrence but more so as an indication of long-term tendencies and a culmination thereof. Both views are represented in an array of fine, sensitive, and provocative analyses presented in Cvek's book dealing with the aftermath of 9/11 but also pointing to a prehistory of the event. The book's agenda is deceptively simple as the author intends to uncover what lies behind the "hegemonic cultural encoding" (187) of 9/11 attacks in New York City in particular (other locations are mentioned but not elaborated on). In order to accomplish this goal, the author marshals his evidence in the chapters that both reinstate and reconfigure the fluctuating, ever expanding or shrinking boundaries of the textual archive that is his interest.
- 2 Some items in the archive are expected and by now canonical inclusions, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, treated at length in chapter

three, or Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, the subject of chapter eight. Others are included in the archive, such as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* but from motives that are themselves cast as a point of analysis in Cvek's approach. The reader is in for the main surprise, however, in the chapters that in a bold but fully motivated move enact the expansion of the 9/11 archive thus raising and keeping in focus a number of controversial and submerged questions, especially within the purview of a US-based perspective on the terrorist attacks. The additions to the archive are DeLillo's novel predating *Falling Man*, *Cosmopolis*, a novel that apparently has very little if nothing at all to do with the 9/11 itself, of which the author subtly dissuades us in chapter seven, with an even bolder intervention occurring in the final chapter which offers a reading of Thomas Pynchon's latest monster of the novel, *Against the Day*. Other likely candidates, mentioned in passing, include John Barth, William Gibson, Ken Kalfus, Neil LaBute, Claire Messud, David Rees, John Updike, and Paul West implying greater possibilities in further approaches to the mediation of 9/11.

- 3 The discussion on 9/11 is far from over and closed if we look at continuing debates as to the appropriate ways of memorializing the event, and given the fact that the publication of the book is in confluence both with the tenth anniversary of the attacks, and with the recent unveiling of, what some critics enthusiastically see as "a masterpiece at Ground Zero" (as suggested by a recent headline in *The New York Review of Books*). The likelihood is that the monument at the site of Twin Towers will gain a stature comparable to that of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. The book is thus bent on capturing all the mythic resonances of the event but, in doing so, it reaches principally for historical and materialist tools.
- 4 Some of the procedures applied on more representative segments of the archive are the familiar fare (notably so trauma theory) since this has predictably been one of the prevailing frames for mediating the event. Where Cvek's approach enriches the discussion is in its insistence to historicize the traumatic impact, to consider trauma also as a socially produced and sustained process, and to further politicize its ramifications, especially as its fallout is seen to be manifested in the way history enters the national debate in the shape of a foreign body, "an alien other" (19). Trauma theory is productively ruffled by concurrent reading approaches of new American studies, introducing categories of empire, political theories, nationalism studies, ethnic and postcolonial, and queer readings.
- 5 Cultural theory, and its offshoot of visibility and media studies, offers another point of entry into the archive under examination. It is the book's contention that the terrorist attacks have spawned new forms of domestic order relying simultaneously on new modes of intimacy, solidarity, affect, and other, more collective modes of sociality. It is thus pertinent to assess how cultural readings as sensitive as Lauren Berlant's model of the intimate public sphere or Judith Butler's idea of reciprocity in mourning and bodily vulnerability might give us insight into the way the archive requires and fuels a new sense of (personal, familial and collective) identities. The approach that treats specifically the long-term structures of sentimentalism in Foer's and comparable novels and works, raises above all a question of an all too easy but ultimately self-defeating conflation of the private with the public on the heels of trauma. In the chapters two and three, mostly dedicated to this methodology, the author carefully distinguishes between different valences of trauma and traumatization taking time in particular to explain why certain positions within trauma studies are less productive in

demystifying the event and critically assessing its impact, such as a deconstructive view in particular (40). Despite the grain of trauma theory the author's further examination of a confluence of some aspects of trauma and its textualization in the Bildungsroman and infused with a heavily melodramatic mode (Foer, Messud, Glass, Updike, Wasserstein, LaBute are among those cited or analyzed at length), seem to suggest a task of national homogenization successfully performed and resulting in "an increasingly regulated political space in the wake of 9/11" (50).

- 6 Another important intervention the book suggests for the growing body of work on 9/11 is to situate the debates on the scope of the event at the intersection of the national and the global, which is ostensibly also the way to treat the questions of temporality and causality in connection with and beyond 9/11. As Cvek makes clear, the context of the US nation-state would exact the idea of radical break and justify Benjaminian sense of crisis, "a moment of danger," whereas a globalizing view that situates the nation-state as one among several contending forces is less autistic and more in favor of an international perspective providing a mirror to the USA, deflating its exceptionalist ethos. Arguably, even in many probing readings of the event coming from the States, the sense is that an exceptionalist stance is still a governing perspective that even many an astute critic cannot evade. This is a productive, if ultimately irresolvable, impasse for Art Spiegelman, as is the case in some segments of DeLillo's work on or around 9/11, or with some facets of Pynchon's text. The point the book makes is not to dismiss either one or the other view but rather to show how globalization has created certain frames which enhance our understanding of 9/11 not exclusively in US-American terms.
- 7 Even though the book invites us, in particular in chapters one and two, to give due attention to the ways the dynamics, temporal and psychic, of trauma has been used to shore up the wounded national body trying to work through the traumatic event, it is in chapter four that a historically minded perspective upsets a presumed balance between the world and the nation. Spiegelman uses the graphic form to remind his readers of things that the US will have forgotten, in the sense applied in trauma theory, only to be reactivated by a trigger event occurring later, namely, the terrorist attacks. Such a reading of Spiegelman's perspective allows for a diachronic understanding of the event of 9/11, and institutes a different temporality, not exclusively that of the US at the dawn of a new millennium. Spiegelman's example is illustrative as he, firstly, shows ways of reframing iconic images so as to make them legible in unexpected contexts, and, secondly, because he consistently tries to place the notion of "traumatic repetition" within a historical record (86). His graphic novel also presents, as Cvek suggests, an ongoing comment on "the involvement of the media with war politics" (91), their investment "in nation building," as well as their contribution to creating "public memory" of the event (92). Overall, Cvek contends that Spiegelman makes much stronger case than the novels previously discussed for an intriguing conjunction of the personal and public modes of traumatization. Spike Lee's filmic intervention offered in *Inside Man* (2006) and Walter Benjamin's "materialistic philosophy" (94) provide an appropriate opening and closure for this chapter and carry the momentum further.
- 8 What is brought in by the inclusion in chapters five and six of DeLillo's, first, occasional piece, an essay entitled "In the Ruins of the Future," written in immediate response to the attacks, and, subsequently, a novel that he was working on at the time, *Cosmopolis*,

are at least two major concerns. The first invites us to observe a necessary, if not immediately obvious, economic undercurrent permeating not so much the event itself as the encodings it has elicited over the ensuing months and years, while the second refers explicitly to the way DeLillo urges us to think of 9/11 and of the responses to it as an attempt by the USA to grapple with a new phase of globalization, where it no longer figures as a single strongest player (247).

- 9 The book proceeds to deal with DeLillo's fictional and non-fictional, direct and oblique responses to 9/11. DeLillo's interposition is very important here as a middle point between the two aforementioned stances since he seems to be one of the authors that has given sustained attention to different forms of terror-inducing and terrorist behavior. In *Libra* (1988), as we might recall, this tendency is almost programmed into the interior workings of the CIA that in the novel's overpowering vision leads to President Kennedy's assassination. Elsewhere, DeLillo is focused on the forms of either right-wing or left-wing terrorism, whereas in his post-9/11 essays and novels he grapples with the epistemology of the latest brand of terrorism. Not surprisingly, given DeLillo's undisputable iconic stature in contemporary American letters, the assumption is correct that, if anywhere, than it is in his works that we might expect to find some answers to galling questions. How this might be the case is the theme of the next three chapters.
- 10 As DeLillo succinctly puts it, and Cvek points out, "The 9/11 event appears ... as a culmination and intensification of histories preceding it, a final moment that for the United States signaled the entry into a different kind of historical territory" (134). Moreover, DeLillo wants us to consider how this territory is crucially marked by two historical forces, "terrorism and capitalist globalization" (134). It is a heading under which the readings in these chapters mark the intersection of these two inexorable contemporary processes. This is an interesting pairing since it becomes apparent how neither the previous correctly observed re-emergence of the domestic context in which a reading of 9/11 first naturally sought to consolidate itself, nor the present internationalization of perspective provided by DeLillo's sustained gaze at the outside events, can be considered apart but always and continuously brought in relation to one another.
- 11 Once the concept of globalization takes over, the argument runs the risk of becoming diluted but Cvek retains firm control of his material. His definition, following DeLillo's cues is again couched primarily in materialist and Marxist terms (citing Buell and Jameson), and buttressed by world-systems theory while he retains his attention mostly on its economic aspects (113). Globalization, and the ways it hijacks and appropriates some aspects of the US-based event, moreover, are seen as a denial of Fukuyama's famous if premature claim that history has effectively ended (for the United States, if not for the world at large; 118). That this is far from correct is shown in Cvek's careful tracing of DeLillo's refutation of this argument and in the latter's consistent attention to global causes and repercussions of 9/11. The analysis shows how facets of globalization process are importantly US-driven but never entirely under its control (124-25), as DeLillo has superbly shown in what is perhaps the best of his novels, *White Noise* (129). It is also the case that the essay opens up without quite deducing another tantalizing link, that of the mutuality of terrorists and globalization, where the relationship is more complex than either mere exclusion or trenchant opposition to it on the part of the outsiders (140).

- 12 What takes over in the chapters to come is an increasing attention, warranted by focus on DeLillo's work and already outlined as one of Cvek's major concerns, to a systemic view which favors economic flows. It is here that uneventfulness, so to speak, of the event of 9/11 comes to the fore as we are invited rather to consider it as being brought on by the cyclical nature of capitalism, as exemplified by Giovanni Arrighi's and Ian Baucom's application of the notion of "systemic cycles of accumulation" (152). When 9/11 is placed in this perspective, it appears as a crystallization of some trends long in the making—if not in the transitional moment marked by Spiegelman as the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century then certainly since the early 1980s as pointed out by Cvek. In *Cosmopolis* the plot revolves around constant vacillation between deterritorializing pull of global capital flows and reterritorializing roadblocks placed in the protagonist's path on what turns out to be his fateful day (179).
- 13 In the final chapter on DeLillo's extended meditation on the impact of globalization on the nation, the argument takes up DeLillo's own implication in an already analyzed and criticized transposition, ascribed to neoliberalism, of the political into the domestic and personal. Based on analyses offered by Berlant and Duggan, for instance, the study examines how *Falling Man* participates in such a move even as it pushes it to its limits at the intersection of "the intimate and the global" (184). Still, the impression is, according to Cvek, that the novel leaves much to be desired in the way of refuting the strategy of "depoliticization through traumatization" (197), and thus is clearly much less critically inclined than DeLillo's previous pieces related to the event.
- 14 The last chapter, dedicated to the reading of certain strains of Pynchon's very ambitious latest work, *Against the Day*, takes up precisely those filaments that repoliticize the thinking about and invite a re-constitution of a viable public sphere (here taken in Habermasian sense). It also reactivates the strain of historical thinking that Cvek has found so productive in Spiegelman's rendering of the event. The larger argument Cvek makes in this chapter is that Pynchon delves into the history of 9/11 (212), since it is the case that its principal themes flow into the 9/11 archive (214). Pynchon, however, works it in a roundabout way. Pynchon revives a respectable historical record—long buried and mostly neglected in American cultural mainstream—of workers' and radical causes and movements starting with another event, the one that inevitably will never gain the stature comparable to that of 9/11, even if no less momentous over long term, and memorably traced by Alan Trachtenberg as the "incorporation of America." Therefore, the chapter is a well-argued result of Cvek's observable readerly discomfort with the suturing of cracks created by the shock and awe of 9/11, and apparently executed in some of the novels proposing a new domestic scenario, as we have seen in earlier chapters of the book. Pynchon's perspective thus compellingly shows how and why trauma, affect and mourning can only up to a point act as foundations for the body politic and as stabilizers of the public sphere, but that they eventually have to be replaced by more empowering narratives (249). In that sense the chapter stands in productive tension to the earlier chapters on trauma, while it is also a salutary reminder of the reductionism of an exceptionalist perspective (225). Cvek is especially interested in Pynchon's historical vision that must be read against Benjamin's "cyclic-eschatological philosophy of history" (236), so that once again it is the Benjaminian perspective that should inform our final assessment of the central event considered in the book.

- 15 In short, we are here offered in convincing and informed way several frames for grasping the present moment so much in the shadow of the world remade in the wake of the attacks on Twin Towers, and are summoned to consider it simultaneously as a moment of “rupture” and “an exception” (246), a “moment of crisis” (246) but also as part of a continuum of passing into the post-American century punctuated by some significant moments rather than radical breaks. The archive suggested here and the reading methodologies of new American studies coming from different but related disciplines combined in Cvek’s book give evidence for each of these approaches thus refusing either negative reductionism or positive mythicization.
- 16 The book thus constitutes a significant intervention into the as yet fluctuating archive in connection with September 11, 2001, and will be an indispensable sourcebook containing non-US but culturally informed readings of that historical moment. As such, it marks an extremely valuable contribution to yet another archive—that of contemporary American studies in Europe.
-

AUTHOR

JELENA ŠESNIĆ

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb