

*Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, Seminar #683*

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*Chairs: Ryan Kelsey, Professor Frank Moretti*

*Rapporteur: Ruth Palmer*

### **Learning From Disaster: Film and Understanding Our Resiliency**

**Speakers: Brian Rafferty, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Project Rebirth; John J. DeGioia, President of Georgetown University; Alice Greenwald, Director of the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum; Jim Whitaker, Director and Founder of Project Rebirth**

#### **Summary**

CCNMTL, with partners from Georgetown University, Project Rebirth, and the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, hosted a special event entitled Learning from Disaster: Film and Understanding Our Resiliency in Miller Theatre on Wednesday, April 15th at 6:30PM. The event focused on Project Rebirth, a documentary film about the recovery of 10 individuals deeply affected by the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Filmmaker Jim Whitaker discussed the film and introduced a 30-minute preview of the film and Dr. John DeGioia, President of Georgetown University, lead a panel discussion with Whitaker and faculty from Columbia University and Georgetown University who are using the archive of interview footage in innovative pedagogical ways.

#### **The Presentation**

Brian Rafferty, chairman of the board of Project Rebirth and alumnus of Georgetown University, began by welcoming guests and thanking partners from Georgetown University, Columbia University, and the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) for hosting the night's event. Mr. Rafferty then warmly introduced Georgetown University President John DeGioia and explained that President DeGioia immediately grasped the educational opportunities of Project Rebirth, leading Georgetown and Columbia University on the path to collaboration with the organization.

President DeGioia then briefly addressed the audience and announced the speakers presenting for the night, including Alice Greenwald, director of the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum; Jim Whitaker, director and founder of Project Rebirth; and a panel of distinguished faculty from Georgetown and Columbia who share their thoughts on the Project Rebirth initiative. President DeGioia described this initiative as a collaborative effort of Georgetown, Columbia, and Project Rebirth to engage the resources collected during the filming of the Project Rebirth documentary as materials to teach students about a range of subjects, including narrative, grief, and film.

President DeGioia went on to explain that the documentary, directed by Jim Whitaker and now in its seventh year of filming, interweaves time-lapse photography of the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site with the stories of ten individuals

recovering from personal losses on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Each individual tell his or her story during filmed interviews, sharing their grief and coping so that audiences may learn and benefit from their experiences. President DeGioia noted that Project Rebirth provides a historical memory of the tragedy of 9/11 and a tribute to those affected by it, and explained that proceeds from the film will go toward the creation of a Project Rebirth Center, which will provide education and other resources to victims of traumatic events, as well as to first responders.

President DeGioia then introduced a vital partner in Project Rebirth, Alice Greenwald, director of the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum. Ms. Greenwald, who previously worked for 19 years on the development of the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Washington D.C., began by saying she was honored to join with Project Rebirth partners in contemplating how human narratives, such as those in Project Rebirth which are born of unfathomable loss and trauma, can contribute to individual and collective healing and resilience. Those at the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum, Ms. Greenwald explained, feel privileged to incorporate footage from the film into their exhibition, website, and educational programming.

She went on to discuss how both the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum, are dedicated to using storytelling to memorialize events defined by unimaginable personal loss and collective trauma. Ms. Greenwald's tenure at the Holocaust Museum allowed her the opportunity to reflect extensively on memory and museums, and led her to a key understanding: memory resides in a space between cognitive understanding and emotional intelligence.

Continuing on this idea, Ms. Greenwald described that memorial museums, especially those located where the memorialized events took place, provide an opportunity for an encounter with the void and for seeing the world through a different lens. Through the act of remembering these museums become sites of conscience. At the Holocaust Museum the visitor's experience is more like that of theater or film; artifacts are not appreciated as self-contained objects, but rather for their contribution to the overall narrative that visitors experience, in which both emotional and cognitive intelligence is invoked in the process of remembering.

Ms. Greenwald stressed that the paradigm established by this museum provides key lessons for those developing the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum. In its intense particularity, the Holocaust Museum speaks directly to conscience and the need to act in the face of genocide. The National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum likewise has a responsibility to remember well, so that the intense particularity of 9/11 can speak to bigger concerns.

Then, Ms. Greenwald explained that the primary obligations of the museum are to tell what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, to document the response to the events by Americans and the world community, and to memorialize those who died. But achieving this presents some real challenges, of which she named only a few. First, the museum must acknowledge and ratify the visitor's own experience of these events; in this sense, the

9/11 Memorial differs from memorials of long-past historical events, such as Gettysburg. Secondly, the exhibits must be as compelling and engaging as possible within the context of a story that is difficult for many. The museum will not be a didactic top-down experience; it must be as much about feeling as about knowing. Ms. Greenwald pointed out that it is also not a story that can be told in a conventional linear way because it is about the simultaneity of events, and this presents an additional challenge. How do you tell the story so that it will be comprehensible? Finally, in telling this story they must provide a sense of historical context while acknowledging that the story is not yet over; our collective understanding of 9/11 will continue to evolve.

Ms. Greenwald concluded by noting that many of the museum's visitors will come to it as a kind of pilgrimage, in an act of bearing witness. Ultimately, the focus of the museum, much like Project Rebirth, must be on the impact of these events on the lives of real people and their communities. By focusing on the human story, the museum will become a moral platform attesting to the indefensibility of terrorism. If the job is done well, the museum will do more than tell the story of 9/11; it will help us understand ourselves and the world in which we live. The task of the museum and of its visitors is to imagine the kind of world we want to bequeath to future generations; it is a commitment to the promises we are willing to make.

Jim Whitaker, director and founder of Project Rebirth, then provided the back story to the project's inception. He explained that it was during a period of deep grief over his mother's death that he first came to the World Trade Center site a month after the attacks. He was struck by the loss that confronted him, but also with the realization that someday that site would look different: he had a moment of hope and realized that cameras should be put up to document those changes for as many years as it would take. That was the beginning of Project Rebirth.

Mr. Whitaker explained that as the human toll of 9/11 became clear he realized that the film should document not only the physical rebirth of the site, but also the human stories of rebirth following those events, so he and a field producer set about trying to find 10 people who had been personally affected by those events. The selection process was not scientific; rather, it was a process of finding people with an emotional connection and interest in the long-term collaboration the project required.

Mr. Whitaker explained that he is currently in the process of editing the final film. Every day in the editing room, looking back over seven years of footage, he has been struck by how he is constantly learning from the film's participants, and feels gratitude for the opportunity—connected in a seemingly fateful way to the death of his mother—to participate in their lives, to share them with the audience, and, through the partnership with the National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial and Museum, to eventually share them with the world.

## Panel Discussion

**Faculty Panelists: Randall Bass, Associate Professor of the English Department and Executive Director of the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, Georgetown University; George Bonnanno, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University; Bernard Cook, American Studies Program, Georgetown University; Katherine Shear, Columbia School of Social Work**

Following the showing of a 30-minute excerpt of the Project Rebirth film, Georgetown University President John DeGioia moderated a panel discussion about the potential educational applications of the raw Project Rebirth interview footage, which has been made available to faculty members at Columbia and Georgetown Universities. After introducing each of the panelists, President DeGioia asked them to explain how a film like Project Rebirth fits into the context of their own work.

Katherine Shear, from the Columbia School of Social Work, began by explaining that since the film footage was only recently made available, the extent of the project's application to her own work on the psychiatry of grief, especially complicated grief, is not yet clear. She explained that the bereaved initially experience a stage called acute grief, in which they feel disinterested in the world and disconnected from others. Most people pass through this phase, coming to terms with the loss in a period called integrated grief, in which the intense sadness and longing that characterize the initial phase of grief fade into the background, although they never fully disappear. This process is well documented in Project Rebirth. Those who suffer from complicated grief, which is the focus of much of Professor Shear's work, never pass out of the acute grief stage. She went on to demonstrate how she has used Project Rebirth interview footage to teach master's level social workers. Using a tool called VITAL, a web-based environment that supports managing and annotating video content, students were asked to write essays analyzing how interviewees manifested different symptoms of grief.

Randy Bass next explained how he had incorporated Project Rebirth into a first-year writing course at Georgetown. The central question of the course was "what does it mean to write, to have a voice, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" Early in the semester, students watched the 30-minute version of Project Rebirth, and were asked to blog their responses to it. The class returned to Project Rebirth later in the semester, this time using the VITAL tool. They were asked to find short clips to convey certain ideas, before submitting 1000-word essays that were incorporated into a Project Rebirth listening guide.

Professor Bass explained that Project Rebirth's value for teaching first-year writing is threefold: first, the interview footage gets students to slow down and really listen and understand how every utterance is a complex act of expression between the speaker and the audience. Secondly, the footage helped students to develop a very complex sense of language as they hear the interview subjects using language in very complex ways. Thirdly, the Project Rebirth tapes have a surprising complexity, which makes them wonderful tools for helping students to develop a sense of empathy; after all, one path to

empathy is developing a sense that something that appeared simple is actually very complex.

George Bonnano, a psychological researcher from Columbia Teachers College, explained that while most psychologists focus on pathological responses to trauma, he is interested in documenting the whole range of human reactions to potentially traumatic events. After interviewing many survivors of potential traumas, he has consistently found that between one-third and two-thirds demonstrate resilience; they cope remarkably well and are basically able to continue functioning. This is where Project Rebirth comes into play: it is a great resource to show, in a very human way, the various responses that people have to trauma. In his master's level course on the Psychology of Loss and Trauma, he asked students to watch the full footage of two of the interviewees and to write about it; in the future he expects to do more facial analysis and coding of facial expressions using the clips.

Bernard Cook, who teaches documentary studies in the American Studies Program at Georgetown, explained that in film studies, students and scholars typically look at final products and then analyze them. The availability of the raw Project Rebirth footage makes it possible for students to get inside the process of making a documentary. He currently teaches a course called Social Justice Documentary Video, in which students are required to produce a documentary on a social issue. Last semester, as students were moving into the post-production stages, he asked them to use VITAL to focus on very specific formal elements of documentary-making in the Project Rebirth tapes, such as the lighting or the black background. The raw footage gives the students a rare opportunity to look closely at how you take so much footage and structure a coherent narrative—to really get inside a filmmaker's process as it is happening.

President DeGioia asked the panelists to reflect on how they might use Project Rebirth in new ways going forward. Bernard Cook responded that this year's uses of the materials had been a trial run and that they had only scraped the surface of what could be done with these materials. They had discussed with filmmaker Jim Whitaker the possibility of bringing Georgetown film students out to L.A. to experience first hand his documentary-making process. George Bonnano noted that he will probably continue to use the materials to focus on how people change over time in their responses to trauma. He is also intrigued by the way the Project Rebirth footage differs from film obtained by psychological researchers when they conduct similar interviews.

Randy Bass said that in his capacity as developer of new designs for learning at Georgetown, he would love to gather students and instructors from a variety of first-year classes to work with Project Rebirth in an interdisciplinary way to see how they might further develop educational tools related to it. Kathy Shear added that she planned to use the tapes more frequently in the course of a given semester, perhaps by asking students to analyze a very small segment of footage then building to larger segments.

President DeGioia asked filmmaker Jim Whitaker to discuss how he saw the trajectory of the film coming to a close. Mr. Whitaker responded that at this point he is chipping away

at the massive amount of interview footage to let the essence of the subjects' stories emerge. He explained that he is now working full time to complete it, largely because the interviewees all seemed to make great strides in their recovery and to reach a kind of plateau in the coping process around the fourth year. Now, in year seven, their story arcs seem to have reached a logical conclusion for the film.

President DeGioia concluded the discussion by thanking the distinguished panelists and Columbia University for hosting the evening's event. Brian Rafferty added his thanks to all participants and the evening drew to a close.