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## Compelling Memory: 9/11 and the Work of Mourning in Mike Binder's *Reign Over Me*

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## COMPELLING MEMORY

9/11 AND THE WORK OF MOURNING IN MIKE BINDER'S *REIGN OVER ME*

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*Esther Peeren*

**I**n New York, a block from the National 9/11 Memorial Museum, stands the 9/11 Tribute Center (opened in 2006 and previously known as the Tribute WTC Visitor Center), which aims to commemorate the victims and convey accounts of 9/11 and the earlier 1993 World Trade Center bombing through “person to person history.” When I visited, in 2010, the promise “We will never forget” was prominently featured on a wall in the exhibition, which also included video and audio recordings of personal testimonies, a time line of the attacks, and a model of the buildings and memorial planned for the WTC site. A large section of the Tribute Center was devoted to a gift shop selling, as the brochure put it, “Tribute items” that “allow visitors to take home and remember the Tribute experience.” The displacement from commemorating the attacks to remembering one’s experience at the Tribute Center is remarkable, all the more so because of the necessary relation established to material consumption; the implication being that only those who return home with Tribute items will remember.

According to Marita Sturken, 9/11 souvenirs envelop their purchasers in a depoliticizing “comfort culture” (2007, 5), while Karen J. Engle sees them as allowing Americans to narcissistically identify with the dominant patriotic narrative of the event (72). What I want to add to these perspectives is a focus on the expressive dimension of these souvenirs—the way in which, as material objects designed to be put on display, they not only provide their owners with a sense of decontextualized comfort or patriotic identification but also serve to certify to others that memory is taking place and that it is doing so in the “proper” socially sanctioned form.<sup>1</sup>

This expressive dimension also manifests in a card distributed at the Tribute Center advertising the opportunity to sponsor a cobblestone on the National 9/11 Memorial Plaza by imploring: “Help pave the way

to remembrance and hope." As if there could be no remembrance or hope without conspicuous material signs pointing to their presence. The cobblestones, moreover, are not only conceived as initiating remembrance and hope (as opposed to embodying their preexistence) but also designed to endorse and display the sponsors' participation in this production. Although "out of respect for the victims" the cobblestones themselves will remain unmarked, the card indicates that sponsors' names will be "listed along with the locations of their cobblestones at Memorial Plaza kiosks."<sup>2</sup>

The demonstrative, materialized form of memorialization that appears here represents both a continuation of and a shift in the "culture of memory" Andreas Huyssen sees accelerating and spreading across the globe from the 1980s onward (25).<sup>3</sup> In the specific context of 9/11—which has local and global aspects, but is primarily tied to the consolidation of American national identity and the notion of exceptionalism bound to it—the obsessive drive to remember, proceeding from the immediate and ubiquitous promise to "never forget," covers not only the event itself but also, vitally, its commemoration: the memory of memory. Thus, in addition to being characterized by a "rush to memorialization" that saw talk of how to commemorate 9/11 begin the day after the attacks (Sturken 2004, 321), the name of the National September 11 Memorial Museum and its exhibits indicate a resolve to also conserve and display this memorialization.<sup>4</sup> The way "9/11 has created the powerful sense that one is a witness to one's own experience and obligated to record it in some way" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 27) takes shape in the museum's repeated solicitation of "your own" memories of 9/11. The phrase "never forget," moreover, does not just loom large at the 9/11 Tribute Center but also inhabits the Virgil quote "no day shall erase you from the memory of time" inscribed on the wall of the repository within the National September 11 Memorial Museum harboring unidentified or unclaimed human remains, as well as on several items sold in the museum's gift shop. The emergence of this demonstrative, materialized form of memorialization—which, by including its own memorialization, produces a configuration resembling a Russian nesting doll—marks a transmutation of the culture of memory, where memory is a dominant sociopolitical practice aimed at "securing the past" (Huyssen, 37), into a *memory cultus* that renders memory itself subject to cultivation, adoration, and reverence.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of functioning as a practice with a clear, separate object—the event to be remembered—a memory cultus stages memory as self-sanctifying and self-referential: what should be remembered is the need to remember. In addition, the association of the term “cultus” with organized and externalized forms of worship and ceremony enables it to denote the way the promise to remember can become a decree that ideologically enforces a particular expressive form.<sup>6</sup> Where Huysen discerns “survival strategies of public and private memorialization” arising from an intense fear of forgetting (28), what emerges after 9/11 are obligations resulting from a prohibition on forgetting, as when displaying an American flag ceased to represent a choice and became an expectation.<sup>7</sup> The manifestation of memory as a cultic structure that is, I contend, *compelling*, may not have originated with 9/11 or be unique to it, but it is particularly strongly marked in its wake, enabling a critical assessment of its consequences not just in the public realm but also in the private one.

I call the cultic memory of 9/11 compelling because it is enforced and constrained, while also arousing strong interest and fascination. It is, moreover, inherently normative, with the normative dimension covering both memory itself—the compulsion to remember (to remember)—and the way in which this memory is instantiated, its formal and affective dimensions. With 9/11 ideologically enshrined as the ultimate, total irruption of shock, danger, and even “evil” in the American everyday, any memorialization that makes it appear in a different guise comes to be perceived as scandalous. Thus, Thomas Hoepker’s photograph of a group of people in Brooklyn ostensibly relaxing against the background of a smoke-engorged Lower Manhattan, where the Twin Towers have already collapsed, caused controversy when it was first published in 2006, after having been excluded by the photographer from an earlier 9/11 photo book (Jones). Particularly revealing was how maligned some of the people portrayed in the photograph felt and how quick they were to assert their adherence to the “proper” (and by implication only respectable) affective state of “profound . . . shock and disbelief” (*Slate*).

Elements of compulsion in the public memory of 9/11 have been commented on before—not least by Sturken, who stresses that memory mediated through the public consumption and display of kitsch objects produces “predetermined and conscribed emotional responses”

(2007, 21). Here, however, I want to examine 9/11's compelling memory cultus not in the public or political realm but in its impact on personal memory and, especially, mourning. If the public memory of 9/11 is to some extent predicated on the consecration and collectivization of the memory of those who directly lived through the events and victims' families, taken as most "authentic" and, consequently, as providing an infallible moral compass, there is also a converse relation of influence.<sup>8</sup> Grieving individuals may feel burdened by the expectation to exemplify what has been publicly (politically, ideologically) defined as appropriate memory and mourning, making the private sphere as disciplined (and disciplining, in a Foucauldian sense) as the public one.

The implications of this possibility are imagined in a provocative manner in Mike Binder's 2007 film *Reign over Me*, depicting the newly resumed friendship between Alan (Don Cheadle), a New York dentist weighed down by his unfulfilling job and demanding family, and Charlie (Adam Sandler), his former dental school roommate whose wife and three daughters died on 9/11 in one of the crashed planes but who claims not to remember them. As "Hollywood's first mainstream movie about the fallout of 9/11" (Lumenick) and featuring Sandler in an uncharacteristically dark role, *Reign over Me* received substantial critical attention upon its release, but was not particularly successful; it grossed only just over its twenty million dollar budget, disappeared quickly from theaters and was not nominated for any major awards (IMDb). Reviews focused mostly on whether its use of 9/11 as a dramatic device was appropriate and Sandler's portrayal of Charlie convincing.<sup>9</sup> Though exerting little direct cultural influence—the film remains relatively obscure, even among scholars working on 9/11—I want to suggest that *Reign over Me* presents an illuminating, if ambivalent, commentary on the mechanisms and effects of compelling memory and mourning.

This commentary concerns, first of all, the demonstrative, materialized expression compelled by the 9/11 memory cultus, which manifests, in relation to memory and mourning, as what I call their *spectacularization*.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the events of 9/11 have themselves been widely described as spectacular in intention (Kellner; Žižek 2002) and in the way they were experienced as a mass media event seemingly foreshadowed in Hollywood entertainment (Grusin; King). Jean Baudrillard called the violence, in its similarity to a disaster movie, "worse

than real” because “symbolic” and argued that instead of finding meaning in it, “one finds . . . the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible” (2002, 413). The compulsion to keep looking—“we wanted to see it again and again” (Žižek 2002, 12)—that is provoked by the spectacle as “our own theater of cruelty” (Baudrillard 2002, 414) and that works against interpretation and analytical reflection manifested not just in relation to 9/11 as (mass media) event but also in its memorialization. Most notably, the National 9/11 Memorial Museum displays the events of 9/11 in a resolutely “presentist” manner that appears designed to make visitors relive it as spectacle:

Monitors showing what was at the time breaking television news coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), newspaper headlines from that afternoon, 911 emergency calls, all sorts of video footage and photographs of the planes penetrating the twin towers—the museum goes to great lengths to transport you back to September 11, 2001. (Green)<sup>11</sup>

This spectacular mode of presentation carries over to the memorial exhibits, which insistently appeal to the eye (victims whose photographs are not included, presumably at the request of relatives, are still visually represented through a single leaf design) and hold out—in the voices reading out the victims’ names and the tribute-montage of text and images that accompanies them—relatives’ memories and mourning as objects of enthrallment.

In *Reign over Me*, Charlie refuses to satisfy what Baudrillard identifies as the “immoral fascination (even if it unleashes a universal moral reaction)” provoked by spectacle (2002, 414). I will show how the fact that Charlie does not publicly acknowledge his loss and show his memories and grief renders him, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, an “affect alien” and leads to his social, judicial, and medical disciplining (30). Although Charlie materializes his mourning, he does so in an aberrant manner, rejecting the objects supposed to be sticky with grief (like family photographs) and instead using others (a video game, a new kitchen) not considered suitable “mourning means” or “mourning pointers” within the prevailing ideological matrix (34).

The second issue explored through the film’s narrative is the relation between mourning and work as efficient productivity. This relation, which can be traced back to Freud, is not specific to 9/11 but

receives a particular inflection under the conditions of compulsion and spectacularization forcing the work of mourning to become manifest. In *Reign over Me*, Charlie's perceived avoidance of work and dedication to inefficiency is considered an unacceptable (and, for Alan, perversely enviable) escape from the quantifiable productivity supposed to mark successful mourning and "proper" American adulthood. At the same time, I contend that Charlie's repetitive and ostensibly regressive behavior suggests, more than unresolved trauma, an alternative, deconstructive interpretation of the work of mourning incorporating nonproductivity and even failure. While most of Binder's film develops a critical perspective on the alignment of mourning with compulsion, spectacularization, and productivity, its ending—which sees Charlie cathartically expressing his grief in the ideologically sanctioned manner—partially undermines this critique, as is perhaps unavoidable in a mainstream Hollywood production itself subject to the influence of the 9/11 memory cultus. Before turning to my analysis of the film, it is important to outline how, at the end of the twentieth century, mourning was reshaped from shameful secret to spectacle and how its intertwinement with ideas of work has been conceptualized in very different manners.

### SPECTACULARIZING THE WORK OF MOURNING

According to Michel de Certeau, "In our [capitalist] society, the absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the Occidental story of 'There's always something to do' to continue" (191). This renders the dying, who are unable to work, unnamable, and causes them to be hidden away. By extension, the same logic applies to those who mourn the dead, since they, too, are seen as temporarily incapable of participating in the constant acts of labor and consumption capitalism requires. Indeed, in the twentieth century, there was a widespread sense that, when faced with death and mourning, (Western) "society no longer observes a pause" (Ariès, 560). Grief was supposed to be hidden or at least expressed only in private and for a limited period: those who openly and enduringly professed it were seen as "obstinate" and "mercilessly excluded as if [they] were insane" (578).



In the present day, particularly in the Anglo-American context, this mourning taboo seems to have largely been overcome, given the widespread awareness and popularity of the five-stage model of grief, the countless self-help books dealing with bereavement, and the substantial professional grief counseling sector, as well as the growing acceptance—even expectation—of public expressions of mourning in the wake of 9/11 and, before that, the 1997 death of Princess Diana. For Sandra M. Gilbert, the “spontaneous shrines” erected for the 9/11 victims in particular herald a newly democratized, nontraditional type of mourning (278). Following Erika Doss, who points to “the formulaic and increasingly universalized nature of their production” and their status as “highly orchestrated and self-conscious performances of mourning” (8), I would question the spontaneous nature of such memorials and suggest that, by insisting, like the National 9/11 Memorial Museum (which may be seen as marking their institutionalization), on spectacularizing grief through a persistent, cumulative visualization, they in fact participate in its compulsion. Grief is transformed from something confined to the individual or the private sphere of the family—with traditional mourning dress signifying precisely a state of separation from everyday society—into something that not only *can be*, but *has to be* performed in front of others in order to enable its verification and evaluation.

The “spectacle” in “spectacularization,” then, also refers to the element of ostentation—to the way mourning is compelled, through displays of emotion or memory objects, to attract recognition as attention and approval. After 9/11, the drive to render private grief collectively consumable and assessable was exemplified not only by the shrines (which quickly became standardized in their show of spontaneity) but also by the public fascination with missing person posters and newspaper profiles of the victims. Such public displays, seen in many different contexts before and since, may indeed provide a way “of bearing witness to individual lives” as ordinary lives (Gilbert, 281), yet how these lives need to be presented to garner recognition is subject to particular interpretations of what counts as “ordinary.”<sup>12</sup> The displays can, moreover, work to collectivize and formalize personal grief to the point at which declining to engage in its public expression is coded as suspicious or callous.<sup>13</sup> Thus, far from being fully spontaneous, public expressions of grief are socially, politically, and ideologically channeled,

surveilled, and restricted; they may not be tolerated at all in relation to those at the bottom of the existing “hierarchy of grief” (Butler 32). In addition, they are not indefinitely sanctioned but supposed to run their course within a reasonable period and refrain from interfering with economic efficiency—already on September 16, 2001, President George W. Bush remarked: “Today, millions of Americans mourned and prayed, and tomorrow we go back to work.”<sup>14</sup>

While Bush separates the activity of mourning from work as productivity, in its spectacularized form, mourning is no longer incompatible with the capitalist discourse of “there’s always something to do.” Instead of signifying a withdrawal from or interruption of working society, mourning has become yet another form of work, in the sense of a utilitarian activity.<sup>15</sup> Seen as a task to be expressed and completed, the industry that has arisen around it not only keeps the mourner occupied but also provides work for a number of professionals as well as the manufacturers and retailers of the consumption goods supposed to facilitate mourning and put it on display.

The work of mourning in this sense essentially comprises the work of *working through*: the fulfillment of Freud’s imperative to recognize that the lost love object no longer exists, sever the libido’s attachments to it, and find a substitute. Only through such an economical exchange can one avoid the pathological state of melancholia, associated with the unproductive repetitions of neurosis and, if not overcome, self-destruction. For Freud, “serious mourning,” like melancholia, is associated with a “turning away from any task that is not related to the memory of the deceased,” and “the only reason, in fact, why this behavior does not strike us as pathological is that we are so easily able to explain it” (2005, 204). Notably, his explanation balances out the neglected tasks (a potentially pathological rejection of work) with the “work that mourning performs” (204). Even though this work ultimately yields a profit in the form of a “free and uninhibited” ego, it is nevertheless considered regrettable that its painful nature cannot easily be explained “in economic terms” (205). A satisfactory justification would have to wait until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which traces the seemingly uneconomic repetition of painful experiences to the death drive, a concept that appears to reject the cumulative logic of capitalism in privileging “inertia” (2001, 36). This inertia, however, is not an achieved state but again a set task; the Freudian subject is relentlessly

kept *at work* to ensure it reaches death on its own terms. There is, moreover, a conceptual resemblance and temporal concurrence between Freud's discovery of the death drive and the emergence of mass (Fordist) production: "Freud installs the process of *repetition* at the core of objective determinations, at the very moment when the general system of production passes into pure and simple *reproduction*" (Baudrillard 2006, 148, emphasis in original). Thus, Freud's mourning work remains ensconced in a discourse of productivity striving for maximum efficiency.

As Engle also points out, Jacques Derrida conceptualizes work differently. In his writings on "the work of mourning," work is divorced from economical productivity; it cannot be quantified or rushed and, as a continuous *reworking* rather than a finite *working through* or *out*, generates no clear revenue. Considered "interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable" (Derrida 2003, 143), this deconstructive notion of mourning dissolves the Freudian binary of success versus failure. Citing Louis Marin, Derrida transforms mourning into

a work *without force*, a work that would have to work at *renouncing* force, its own force, a work that would have to work at *failure*, and thus at mourning and getting over force, a work working at its own *unproductivity*, absolutely, working to absolve or to absolve itself of whatever might be absolute about "force." (2003, 144, emphasis added)

Here, mourning is *without force*: it cannot be (en)forced or compelled, it cannot force anything (least of all its own end), and it cannot be quantified as more or less forceful. Associated with renunciation, failure and nonproductivity—with a force that continually challenges its own status as absolute presence—mourning becomes an uncertain, infinite process. As a "failure" that is active, that has to be *worked at*, it retains its association with work as effort and responsibility while escaping the discourse of economic productivity that recognizes work as "proper" work only when it leads to measurable yields.

For Derrida, moreover, mourning is undertaken as an ethical responsibility—in service not of the self but of the dead other. Hence, he cautions that we "should not develop a taste for mourning" or fetishize the mourning process by ending up more attached to our tears than to whom they grieve (2003, 110). At the same time, in *Specters of Marx*, he insists that the work of mourning cannot be refused altogether:

while attempting to forget can seem attractive, resisting mourning is impossible since the dead always haunt us and their ghosts cannot be ignored (1994, 176). As I will show, the inevitability of mourning is at the heart of *Reign over Me*, which pits the different conceptualizations of mourning's work discussed in this section against each other in the context of the post-9/11 memory cultus.

## REFUSING MEMORY

The tension between mourning as an ostentatious, result-oriented economic activity and an ongoing impossibility or necessary failure pervades *Reign over Me*. The beginning of the film focuses on Alan, who feels unfulfilled by his work in cosmetic dentistry and irritated by the demands of his aging parents, wife, and two daughters. He is particularly troubled by the way his wife selects his leisure activities and by his lack of friends or hobbies of his own. Then he encounters his old dental-school roommate Charlie (the loss of whose family Alan previously discussed with his wife) riding a motorized push scooter—a distinctly inefficient mode of transport—through the New York streets. After getting Charlie to stop, one of the first questions Alan asks is: “Are you practicing?” He means: are you working as a dentist? Charlie, however, destabilizes the discourse of productivity underpinning this question by answering: “I’m practicing all the time, up in the valley. Took down twelve of the Colossus so far.” When Alan inquires whether the valley is a medical complex, Charlie responds: “It’s more like another dimension. You take a journey and discover yourself.” What Alan and the viewer may take as references to some sort of recovery program are more red herrings: it turns out Charlie is talking about the video game *Shadow of the Colossus*, which he is later shown obsessively playing in his largely unfurnished apartment on an enormous flat-screen television (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> The misunderstanding about the term “practicing” inaugurates a pattern in which Charlie is consistently situated on the side of nonproductivity. Supported by the insurance and government payouts related to the loss of his family, he no longer works as a dentist, and most of what he does is perceived as play. Besides the video game, Charlie is obsessed with trivia, listens to music, jams on a drum set, and collects records. Although he refers



Figure 1. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. Charlie playing *Shadow of the Colossus* in his apartment with Alan watching.

to the record collection as “a work in progress,” no economic or even cultural capital is generated, since the records he collects are neither rare nor worthy of a connoisseur, but merely those he remembers from his youth. The only activity Charlie undertakes that cannot be labeled as play is his repeated remodeling of the apartment kitchen, which equally evades notions of output since it is endlessly redone.

Most reviews of *Reign over Me* relate Charlie’s behavior to his inability to deal with the loss of his family and associate it with regression.<sup>17</sup> The film supports this interpretation to some extent (also in casting Sandler, whose mannerisms invoke his frequent comic roles as a man-child), but at the same time allows a reading that goes beyond the familiar trope of the traumatized person unable to acknowledge and integrate the traumatic event. Significantly, Charlie’s life is not fully on hold: he is not in a catatonic state or unable to cope with everyday tasks; with some help from his landlady and his accountant (who do not push him to remember his family), he is able to live a life that emphatically includes enjoyment and that mimics that of an adolescent or child only if all forms of leisure and nonproductive labor are considered incompatible with adulthood, as Alan seems to have convinced himself. Thus, it is predominantly in view of the challenge it poses to the prevalent ideologies of American adulthood, trauma, and mourning that Charlie’s behavior comes to be—in fact, *has to be*—defined as immature, inadequate, and in need of a disciplining presented as help. The perception that Charlie is not doing what is considered the necessary work of mourning and remembering in the wake of 9/11, especially having suffered such considerable personal loss, is predicated, in line

with the spectacularization of mourning and the post-9/11 memory cultus, on his lack of demonstrative commemoration and grief, which becomes even more aberrant—and potentially un-American (in light of President Bush’s exhortation to get back to work)—given that he has not returned to dentistry or found another job. However, the film suggests that his insistence to others that he does not remember his family does not necessarily mean that he has no memory of them or is not engaged in his own form of mourning. At one point, he tellingly says: “I don’t remember them, all right. I don’t like to remember them.” The repeated kitchen remodeling, moreover, can be taken to represent not so much an absolute failure to mourn as a failure to mourn in the ideologically prescribed manner.

Brian Brown—reflecting on *Reign over Me* as part of the filmic genre of the “traumedy,” which combines grief and humor in an ironic portrayal of American society as “built upon capitalism, competitiveness, and success”—reads the kitchen remodeling as complying with consumerism and the concept of “buying to replace grief” (30, 34). This fails to take into account that Charlie is far from a model consumer: he never buys more than he needs (he keeps playing the same songs on his iPod and owns only one video game) and even when he does accumulate (as with his record collection), the objects are not new but secondhand and semiobsolete. The kitchen remodeling itself can be seen as an act of anticonsumerism: the materials Charlie buys are almost immediately destroyed and what is important to him is not the act of buying but the act of constructing and deconstructing *for* his wife and daughters (who had wanted a new kitchen) in an endless process that accords with Derrida’s redefinition of mourning as “a work that would have to work at failure” and is put in the service of the dead (2003, 144).

The reiterative process of construction/deconstruction/reconstruction also resonates with the movement of weaving and unweaving Jean Laplanche associates with mourning in his shrewd reading of the story of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Asking what exactly Penelope’s “work” is, Laplanche suggests that

perhaps she only unweaves in order to weave, to be able to weave a new tapestry. It would thus be a work of *mourning*, mourning for Ulysses. But Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning. She patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them in a different way. (251–52, emphasis in original)

The weaving/unweaving is a way of remaining attentive to the deceased's memory, to foster a continuing interaction based on a form of work—actual physical labor—that, in the absence of a finished product, escapes the system of economic exchange, which, in Penelope's case, includes herself as a potential wife for the suitors. Any spectacularization of mourning is also refused as the promised tableau never materializes and the work of weaving/unweaving takes place at night, out of sight. What Penelope engages in, then, is a continuous *reworking* instead of a *working through*.

Similarly, Charlie's kitchen remodeling—the physical demands of which are stressed in a scene showing him struggling to install a fridge—indicates there is indeed a *work* of mourning going on, but a work that is displaced, kept private, and does not lead to a definitive resolution. However, in the world around Charlie, the collective, politicized drive to commemorate 9/11 ideologically compels particular, spectacularized forms of memory and mourning, rendering different forms of mourning and forgetting incomprehensible, nonimaginable.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, his individual trajectory of grief becomes subject to surveillance and intervention. For a while, Alan is content to “play” along with Charlie, as this also allows him an escape from the adult responsibilities he experiences as oppressing. But then he decides Charlie should see a therapist, a decision made partly out of concern for his friend, partly out of envy at Charlie's ability to enjoy the freedom to “play” without consequences (whereas Alan's wife tells him that staying out entire nights is “not acceptable” and he feels forced to obfuscate the fun he has been having with Charlie by describing their time together as “a sea of sadness”). Significantly, Alan motivates his decision by insisting that “he's gotta get back in the game. He's gotta get his life back, you know.” *Shadow of the Colossus* is clearly not the right “game” for Charlie to be involved in; he has to return to the only valid game a grown-up American man can play without being seen to play, that of life as a productive citizen.<sup>19</sup> Besides “saving” Charlie from what is now designated a nonlife, such a return would assuage Alan's jealousy by validating his strenuous working and family life as the only sane, livable option.

When Charlie finally agrees he needs help, he indicates his conviction that he should not be forced to remember too quickly: “I wanna get help . . . I just—I gotta be really careful, though, I don't—I just know

I'm better off not having certain thoughts." Alan takes him to a psychologist, who at first seems sympathetic to Charlie's need to proceed slowly, letting him end their meetings whenever he wants them to be over (usually right after they start). However, after a few sessions, she invokes the discourse of productivity by insisting that "there is no point in you coming here every week if we eventually don't discuss your life and your family." Although Charlie again leaves, the pressure to *get to work* and stop wasting time precipitates a breakthrough in the waiting room, where he tells Alan about the loss of his wife and daughters, which, for the first time in the film, is explicitly linked to 9/11. The scene can easily be read as a triumphant one, endorsing Alan's perseverance in seeking help for Charlie and the skill of the therapist, who listens in on the conversation from the open door (Figure 2). Her presence transforms what is essentially a private confession into a voyeuristic display that emphasizes, through a series of close-up sequences of Charlie's tear-strewn face, the expressive release of emotion, aligning him—at the very moment when 9/11 is definitively established as being at the origin of his loss—with the demonstrative mode of mourning compelled in its wake (Figure 3). While raising the expectation that this moment will prove the beginning of a recovery that will see Charlie rejoin "life" defined as participation in productive labor, the viewer is subtly alerted that the perceived climax is not all it seems.

A measure of skepticism is induced even before Charlie breaks down by a glimpse the camera affords of the kitchen brochure he flicks through as he is moving toward the waiting room (Figure 4). At the top of one page, above a glossy illustration of a sparkling new kitchen,



Figure 2. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. Charlie's therapist watching from the door opening as he discusses the loss of his family with Alan for the first time.





Figure 3. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. Charlie breaking down after he tells Alan about the death of his wife and three daughters in the 9/11 attacks.



Figure 4. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. Charlie flicking through a kitchen brochure at the therapist's office.

we see the words “refresh, renew, revive,” which may be read as a cynical comment on the American therapy industry and its commercialized drive for efficiency, its emphasis on (mass-) producing “revived” subjects able to effortlessly slide back into ordinary, industrious life. In addition, the shot could be seen as a warning to viewers not to uncritically accept the seemingly cathartic moment that is to follow, but to question its spectacular logic and compelling nature, which extends both to Charlie and to the film’s viewers, especially American ones. Even if this caution is not taken up, the film quickly makes clear that Charlie’s alignment with the requirements of the post-9/11 memory cultus does not constitute a healing. Openly expressing memories of his family and giving up his own practice of deconstruction/reconstruction turns out to be too much for him to bear. He stops playing *Shadow of the Colossus* and working on the kitchen, begins to watch the

news and starts drinking, before attempting to provoke two police officers into shooting him in the street.

After Charlie, again denying he ever had a family, has been assessed in a psychiatric ward, a court case ensues that ostensibly centers on the question of whether he should be committed for his own safety. In fact, however, it adjudicates his work of mourning, which is explicitly presented as insufficient and irresponsible. While the suicide attempt has convinced Alan and the therapist that it would be best to let Charlie work through his grief in his own way and at his own pace rather than “on our time,” others feel differently, in particular his parents-in-law, who are—somewhat incongruously—the main witnesses. From their testimony, it becomes clear that they want Charlie to be committed as a form of punishment for not openly remembering their daughter and grandchildren, and thus not mourning them “properly,” in line with what is ideologically sanctioned. They recount how Charlie refused to look at or accept photographs of his wife and children, and, in a fury, broke a lamp they associated with their daughter. The way the parents-in-law link “proper” remembrance with the guarding and display of material objects, and the expression of certain overt, quantifiable behaviors like talking and crying, evokes what I have called the spectacularization of mourning and the capitalist (and American nationalist) imperative of “there’s always something to do” into which this spectacularization has been conscripted.

The anger expressed by Charlie’s mother-in-law about the broken vase is indicative of the way memory objects may come to function as affect markers to the extent that the loss of the object becomes equal to the loss of the affect stuck to it. For the parents-in-law, the lamp was “more than a lamp” in the sense that it was “sticky” with affect as that which “sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects,” to use Ahmed’s terms (29). Breaking the lamp for them equals disrespecting and severing the memorial link to their daughter and the rightful—and righteous—feelings of loss and sadness this link embodies, and thus becomes a morally reprehensible act. Even though these feelings are not in themselves “good” (in the sense of being pleasant or positive), they are “good” in the sense of being what one ought to feel and display under these circumstances. Not having—and especially not expressing—these feelings can cause one to be excluded. Ahmed writes: “We become alienated—out of line with an affective

community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good” (37). In this case, it is not a lack of pleasure but of perceptible pain that causes his parents-in-law to condemn Charlie as an “affect alien” whose body, in its stubborn inexpressiveness, becomes a blockage point “where smooth communication stops” (39).

The extent to which this blockage disturbs is indicated when Charlie’s refusal to comply with the affective compulsion is deemed to disqualify him as a human being. When a lawyer asks the father-in-law whether he carries pictures of his grandchildren, his wife hisses: “Of course he does. What is he, an animal?” This positions Charlie, who refuses to carry such material tokens certifying his grief, outside humanity—potentially at the same level as the “evil-doers” and their “barbarism” President Bush referenced in his post-9/11 speech. In a cruel attempt to enforce proper, civilized mourning and “infect” Charlie with the appropriate affect—as Ahmed shows, affects are often taken to be contagious—the lawyer puts enlarged copies of the photographs in front of Charlie, who tries to shut out the images by putting on his headphones, turning up his music, rocking back and forth, and singing along with the lyrics (Figures 5, 6, and 7). His behavior is judged disturbing (on multiple levels) and causes him to be removed from the courtroom.

The judge then calls the lawyers and parents-in-law into his chambers to tell them he has realized “this is a family matter; this is not something that the state should be deciding upon.” The medical issue of whether Charlie is a danger to himself or others is abandoned as



Figure 5. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. The lawyer putting photographs of Charlie’s family in front of him during the court case.



Figure 6. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. One of the photographs of Charlie's family the lawyer confronts him with.



Figure 7. *Reign over Me*, screen capture. Charlie's distraught response to being confronted with photographs of his family.

the only pertinent question becomes whether Charlie's perceived refusal to remember and mourn is acceptable to those around him. The judge conveys his authority to the parents-in-law, telling them that he is "going to let the two of you decide," and instructs them to consider what their daughter would have wanted. While invoking, through the appeal to their daughter's wishes, Derrida's notion of mourning as an obligation towards the dead, the judge ultimately positions it as an affair between the living. Mourning is placed under social jurisdiction; no longer the shamed private act Ariès saw it become in the twentieth century, it once more becomes a social one that can be legitimately policed by others involved in the loss, just as in earlier times, when mourning attire and other associated practices were strictly enforced. It seems as though the work of mourning does not predominantly mediate between the mourner and the deceased, as it does for Derrida

and Freud, but instead becomes something to be adjudicated between mourners or between a mourner and the rest of society, prompting questions of what behavior counts as mourning and who can or should be made to mourn.

These questions supplement Judith Butler's query: "What *makes for a grievable life?*" (20, emphasis in original). Butler goes further than Derrida and Laplanche by conceptualizing mourning as an indefinite, uncertain process of *being worked on* instead of a *working at*: "Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (21, emphasis in original). Moreover, as a sign of our inescapable relationality—the fact that our being is always bound up with that of others—mourning becomes the basis for a political community grounded in "fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (21). Whereas for Butler, grief and mourning can potentially foster communality and understanding, *Reign over Me* draws attention to its darker side, where affective normativity and competitiveness can turn it into an instrument of separation and exclusion.

Specifically, Alan's perverse jealousy of Charlie, which recodes the tragic loss of his family as a desirable liberation from responsibility, can be related to John Mowitt's notion of "trauma envy," defined as "the desire to experience that which authorizes the specifically moral condemnation of others" (280).<sup>20</sup> Importantly, this resentment is caused precisely by a view of trauma as productive, as accompanied by a certain yield: "Trauma has come to be *invested* with such authority and legitimacy that it elicits a concomitant desire to have suffered it, or if not the unspeakable event itself, then the testimonial agency it is understood *to produce*" (283, emphasis added). The loss that precipitates the trauma is conveniently glossed over in favor of a focus on what it delivers in the present. In *Reign over Me*, even the loss itself can be recalibrated as a gain, since Alan increasingly considers his own family a burden. It is important to note, though, that the envy depicted in the film hinges less on moral superiority (in fact, the sanctimonious attitude of Charlie's in-laws is portrayed negatively) than on Charlie's escape from the rat race of economic productivity, which is seen to govern everyday American life as well as the process of mourning. Hence, it is not so much a "mourning envy" than an envy of Charlie's ability to evade the normative strictures of the particular mourning

work compelled by his surroundings. As such, Alan's feelings of jealousy may be seen as part of the film's critique of these strictures.

In the end, however, the film does not maintain its critical stance. The tension created between the compelling, spectacularized form of mourning required by Charlie's in-laws and his own private deconstructive practice, which had been portrayed sympathetically, is resolved when Charlie, after the meeting with the judge has ended, approaches his in-laws and explains to them, in tears, that he has *not* forgotten: "I don't need to talk about her or look at pictures, because the truth is, a lot of times, I see her on the street. I walk down the street. I see her in someone else's face, clearer than any of the pictures you carry with you." Although his words continue to challenge his in-laws' conviction that memory and mourning are absent (or at least inadequate, failed) unless overtly displayed or materialized, the fact that he articulates this and shows his grief to them in accordance with their persistent demand for its spectacularization suggests a surrender to their perspective—and that of the post-9/11 memory cultus, which the film, as a commercial product circulating in its sphere of influence, could perhaps ill afford to critique too unremittingly. Unlike the earlier scene at the therapist's office, this second emotional climax is endorsed as a true, lasting breakthrough: Charlie is not only saved from being committed but is subsequently seen to make a new start, to literally "move on." He finishes the apartment kitchen once more, this time leaving it intact; he moves apartments; and, in line with the Hollywood cliché of two broken souls mending each other, embarks on a tentative relationship with one of his therapist's other patients. Alan, too, is shown to remember his commitments, as he resists the temptation to hang out with Charlie and leaves to call his wife, promising to "open up" to her. Thus, even though Charlie is shown still playing *Shadow of the Colossus* and the closing scene sees Alan taking off on Charlie's push scooter, the dominant impression created by the film's rather abrupt ending is that the two men, by expressing themselves and their relation to 9/11 in the spectacularized manner that the operative ideology renders imaginable (rather than as a nonimaginable forgetting, nonproductivity, or envy), have managed to regain control over their lives and are ready to recommit to the productive capitalist and American nationalist economy of "there's always something to do."

This undercuts but does not fully erase the film's critical portrayal of the effects of compelling and spectacularized forms of memory and mourning in the wake of 9/11. Just as Ahmed argues that those melancholic subjects who refuse to mask past injustices with present happiness could provide alternative models for the social good (50), Charlie's initial refusal to be affected in the common (shared and sanctioned) way by 9/11 and his insistence on sticking his grief to objects not conventionally singled out as "mourning means" offer clues to a different, deconstructive form of remembrance that is oriented toward the deceased, nonfinite, and tolerant of hesitation, failure, and the persistence of pain. The popular cultural portrayal of this other form of mourning in *Reign over Me*—which, until the closing scenes, is validating—renders it imaginable and challenges the potentially dispossessing exclusions and disciplining effected by the compelling spectacularization and notion of work-as-productivity with which the memory and mourning of 9/11 have become dominantly associated. I have primarily focused on the restrictive impact of this association on personal memory and mourning—on the way it can culminate, as shown in Binder's film, in the validation of the most ostentatious expressions of grief as necessarily the most spontaneous and in the establishment of a "hierarchy of grievers" sitting in judgment of each other's work of mourning. Ultimately, Charlie's espousal of a private, nonspectacular, and noncommodified practice of reworking suggests a critique of trauma theories that rely on models of expression, exposure, and "working through" as well as theories that consider trauma as inherently unrepresentable and the traumatized as irrevocably stuck.

In the public realm, the notion that memory and mourning only take place when they are seen to do so, as analyzed in relation to the Tribute Items sold at the 9/11 Tribute Center, now appears to have escalated into the notion that to see *is* to remember and to mourn: the National 9/11 Memorial Museum apparently felt obliged to display the portraits of the 9/11 hijackers at knee-height (so visitors are inevitably looking down on them) in a passage between exhibits so dark that the small portraits are barely visible and the names printed beside them all but illegible—in order to make absolutely clear that these men are excluded from the museum's memorializing mission. It is precisely the museum's adoption of the form of spectacularized compelling memory I have discussed here as its main mode of presentation that makes

such erasures possible and even necessary; instead of enabling representation as reflection and interpretation, this mode prevents the events of 9/11 and its aftermath from being approached analytically (historical and geopolitical contextualization is minimal, even in the exhibit about Al Qaeda) and reduces memorialization to the cultic activity of being seen to remember not necessarily even the events themselves or those who were or have lost, but the ostentatious, productivity-oriented ways in which they have been memorialized from the beginning. As a result, it is becoming ever more difficult—yet ever more essential—to remember 9/11 otherwise.

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## Notes

1. This does not mean all 9/11 souvenirs are considered appropriate: Upon the National 9/11 Memorial Museum's opening in May 2014, the availability in its gift shop of FDNY dog vests, "survivor tree" earrings and, especially, a cheese plate in the shape of an outline of the U.S.A. with heart-shaped holes marking the places where the planes crashed (later withdrawn from the assortment), drew widespread criticism. Significantly, the short-lived controversy mostly centered on specific items perceived as distasteful and on whether the gift shop should be in the same building where human remains are kept; the basic idea of allowing (even encouraging) people to buy items as "a little something to remember [9/11] by" was not contested (Kaufman).

2. A list of cobblestone donors is also available on the 9/11 Memorial website: <https://www.911memorial.org/cobblestone-donors> (accessed June 11, 2014).

3. Jay Winter speaks of a "memory boom," which he links to national political imperatives, the growth of identity politics, increasing affluence, and the availability of public funding (364). Erika Doss uses the pathologizing term "memorial mania" to describe "the contemporary obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent, excessive desire to express, or claim, those issues in visibly public contexts" (7).

4. According to the museum's director, Alice Greenwald, "Memorial museums are museums where educational exhibitions and public programs take place within the context of a memorial environment, typically commemorating events



of tragic and global or national significance." <http://www.911memorial.org/memorial-museum-faq> (accessed June 11, 2014). Although Greenwald sees the memorial environment containing the museum and assumes its different functions can be separated, my experience at the museum was that the line between the two is consistently blurred.

5. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "cultus"—derived from the Latin participle stem of *colĕre*, meaning "cultivation, tending, culture, adoration"—as "an organized system of religious worship or ceremonial."

6. Following Žižek, I conceive of ideology as a "generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and nonvisible, between imaginable and nonimaginable, as well as the changes in this relationship" (1999, 55).

7. For Kaplan, the flags indicate at once "a newly engaged patriotism" and a "way to indicate empathy for those who had lost relatives and friends, and a shared trauma about the shock to the United States" (9). While Kaplan seems to assume that the flags were put up voluntarily, Grewal shows how the American flag, especially for those who were or appeared Middle Eastern or Muslim, became a compulsive way "to signify visibly their allegiance to America" as it was "represented as the signifier of the truth of loyalty and national allegiance rather than as a signifier of multiple meanings which could also be used to conceal rather than to reveal" (549).

8. Goldberger describes the prominent involvement of victims' families in the decision-making process surrounding the future of Ground Zero, while Cohen notes how the National September 11 Memorial Museum felt obliged to consult victims' relatives not only when it came to the question of how to deal with the human remains but also with regard to all aspects of the exhibition.

9. See, for example, Zacharek; Scott; Schwarzbaum.

10. Huyssen also invokes the spectacular in relation to the culture of memory, but in reference to the way historical events and traumas are presented rather than to the appearance of memory itself (29).

11. According to Gray, a similarly presentist mode characterizes American literary representations of 9/11, which convey "the sense of those events as a kind of historical and experiential abyss, a yawning and possibly unbridgeable gap between before and after" (130). In a response, Rothberg labels this mode "a failure of the imagination" (153). As Baudrillard implies, rather than countering the failure of imagination and representation that has been associated with 9/11 (especially from the perspective of trauma theory), compelling memory and its spectacularization, although associated with expression, still prevent the event from being apprehended other than as a stunning (and blinding) immediacy.

12. Jones et al. remark on 9/11 missing person posters: "By turning to conventional imagery, the poster carriers could remember how the loved one had lived a normal life and hope that he or she would do so again. Meanwhile, spectators could easily think about how the missing persons conducted their lives in the past" (113). They imply that less sympathy would be evoked if the "normal life" portrayed were somehow unconventional. In the same vein, Butler has

argued that “the queer lives that vanished on September 11 were not publicly welcomed into the idea of national identity built in the obituary pages” (35). See also Grewal (553).

13. Accusations of coldness were, for instance, leveled against the British Royal Family in the wake of Diana’s death (see Stephen Frears’s film *The Queen*), and in the case of the British missing girl Madeleine McCann a perceived lack of emotionality on the part of her parents—particularly her mother—led to media vilification (Yabroff).

14. See <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html> (accessed June 11, 2014). Significantly, the speech strongly aligns work (as productivity) with the national and presents Americans’ ability to quickly recover and move on from the attacks in decidedly spectacular terms: “People will be amazed at how quickly we rebuild New York; how quickly people come together to really wipe away the rubble and *show the world* that we’re still the strongest nation in the world” (emphasis added).

15. Engle writes: “‘Work’ typically signifies according to classical utilitarian convention. Work is productive; goal-oriented and useful, its purpose is to enable the continuation of the species. All work requires a degree of consumption” (62). She continues by invoking Bataille’s notion of mourning as a form of “non-utilitarian expenditure” that has no end other than itself and may therefore be seen as “the wasteful consumption of our energies.” While Engle focuses on the politicization of mourning at the public, national level, where it is “put to work” to make sense of 9/11 and generate patriotic identification with a militarist discourse, my concern is with the way mourning is itself conceptualized *as* work.

16. See Banita for a more elaborate reading of the function of this video game in *Reign over Me* in the context of a discussion of the spectral afterlives of 9/11. Significantly, *Shadow of the Colossus* revolves around the hero’s quest to defeat sixteen giants in order to resurrect his love, Mono (Banita, 94). Charlie’s playing of this particular game, then, instead of the flight from memory and mourning the other characters in the film perceive it as, may in fact constitute a sustained engagement with his loss.

17. The term “regression” is used by Scott, Stein, Puig, and Foundas.

18. In a way, the commemoration of 9/11 reinforces the “notion of forgetting as a form of illness, a loss of self, and a threat to subjectivity” that Sturken associates with the recovered memory debate of the 1980s (1998, 119).

19. Drori-Avraham provocatively suggests that the “Falling Man” (photographed on the way to his death after jumping from one of the Twin Towers, but never identified), in his ostensibly calm suspension, disrupted the efficiency of the mourning process by falling outside the ideological mold of 9/11 victims as “heroic and courageous,” as well as “hard-working family men and women” (293).

20. See also Sturken’s discussion of “survivor envy”: “The survivor as a figure of wisdom and moral authority emerged in the wake of World War II and now stands as a signifier of a moral standard, someone who must be listened to” (1998, 117).

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