

**Seeing Double**  
**9/11 and its Mirror Image**

Gérôme TRUC

**Why is the photographic record of 9/11, the most photographed event in history, limited to an endlessly repeated loop of a handful of images? In a book as rich as it is concise, Clément Chéroux, a historian of photography and a curator at the Pompidou Center, dissects this “9/11 paradox”.**

Reviewed: Clément Chéroux, *Diplopie. L'image photographique à l'ère des médias globalisés : essai sur le 11 septembre 2001*, Cherbourg-Octeville, Le Point du Jour, 2009. 136 p., 65 illustrations, 20 €.

Few books have been written about 9/11. Since 2001, though, bookstore shelves are laden with books on Al Quaida and Ben Laden and on terrorism and the Islamist threat, as well as survivor stories and novels loosely based on the events of that September morning. The paucity, even eight years later, of essays that provide deeper and better contextualized analysis of the 9/11 attacks themselves renders all the more significant Clément Chéroux's recently published contribution.

The book's title, *Diplopia* (double vision), does not automatically make a prospective reader think that he has a book about 9/11 in his hands. It even takes a minute to fully realize that the cover shot is a wide-angle photograph of one of the World Trade Center. Diplopia, a term borrowed from ophthalmology, is “a functional vision problem that causes the perception of seeing two images of a single object”. In short, double vision, which nicely describes the focus of the author's research during a visit to Princeton University. He methodically examined American and international printed press from September 11 and 12,

2001, trying to understand why looking at photographs of 9/11 can give the impression of seeing double. The book's two sections reflect the fact that the phenomenon of double vision can reflect either of two distinct sensations, that of seeing a loop of images, and *déjà vu*.

Grab it all, lose it all. This truism is certainly truer now than ever for a subject like 9/11. Chéroux's book stands out from the mass of books "about" 9/11 by delimiting its subject precisely, not to the 9/11 attacks in general, nor to how they were handled by the media, but strictly to how they were represented photographically. In other words, although he occasionally alludes to televised broadcasts of the attacks and the collapse of the two towers, they are not his focus. Instead of merely rehashing everything that we saw of 9/11 as so many have done before him, he interrogates this very obviousness by critically exploring the question of what we actually saw.

### **What did we see of 9/11?**

Just over three years ago, the association of the families of victims opened a small museum near Ground Zero to mark the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the attacks. Visitors are invited to compose messages in memory of the victims in the final gallery, and the messages are archived while a selection of them is exhibited in the gallery. A significant number of these messages express their authors' disbelief about what they saw about 9/11 in the media. Phrases that often recur include "I couldn't believe my eyes", "you would have thought it was a movie", or "it seemed like a bad science fiction movie". Some individuals even confess that they had to see Ground Zero for themselves and visit the museum in order to grasp the scale of the tragedy: "Before coming here, I hadn't realized that 9/11 was such a catastrophic event". These statements illustrate a baffling effect caused by viewing televised loops of the same images, but this does not fully explain them. In fact, if many viewers experienced difficulty grasping 9/11, it is also because there were few actual depictions of victims, of the wounded, of ravaged human bodies. What the media showed us of 9/11 was primarily concrete, steel, smoke, flames, and clouds of dust – an urban catastrophe as opposed to a human one.

Among Chéroux's most revealing insights relates to his statistical analyses of the 9/11 photographs. Based on a sample drawn from the covers of 400 US newspapers for September 11 and 12 (out of a total of 1,500), he concluded that the photographs fall into six image types. He found that beyond slight formal variations such as differences in framing, 41% of

the images portray the explosion of the South Tower at the moment of impact of Flight 175, 17% the smoke cloud above Manhattan, 14% the ruins at Ground Zero, 13.5% one of the planes approaching the towers, 6% scenes of panic in the streets of New York, and 3.5% the American flag. Only 5% of the cover photographs fall outside of these six categories, and the World Trade Center is omnipresent; as Chéroux observes, “it is the suffering of the building that dominates”, taking precedent over the suffering of the victims.

Because of this, we seem to keep seeing the same images of 9/11. A very small number of image types were published, which other studies have shown also holds true for the Arabic press. This despite the fact that 9/11 was unquestionably the most photographed event in history, the countless photographs taken by witnesses having for the first time in the history of journalism achieved equal status with the work of professional reporters. Chéroux quotes the manager of a drugstore near the towers as stating “I only sold one thing [on that day] – cameras. In the hour after the first crash, we sold between 60 and 100”. Again, this helps explain the “9/11 paradox”, in which the most photographed event in history was also the one whose handling by the media was the least diversified, yielding “a profusion of images, and the sensation of always seeing the same thing”.

It is not credible to explain away this paradox as stemming from official censorship orchestrated from Washington, because the administration, totally overwhelmed by events, was utterly incapable of influencing the media coverage during the early hours. “Shocking” images of 9/11 do of course exist, and whether circulated widely or not, they were not censored. Chéroux lingers over the most famous of these shots, several of which prompted considerable controversy that itself provides evidence of their broad circulation. The most celebrated of these images was Richard Drew’s “Falling Man” shot, published in *The Herald* on September 12, of a man trapped in the towers who chose auto-defenestration over burning to death or being suffocated. Another famous photograph is “The Hand”, taken by Todd Maisel, which appeared in the *New York Daily News* and showed a hand, with one finger pointing, lying on a Liberty Street sidewalk before the towers’ collapse. The Hand was not the only image of human body parts that circulated (other examples can be found in the back of *Here is New York*), but their rarity reflects the fact that they could be taken only in an exceedingly dangerous area during the very short interval between the first strike at 8:46 and 9:59 a.m, when the first tower collapsed.

## September 11 and Pearl Harbor: An exemplary case of inter-iconicity

One of the most important missions for journalists is to render events intelligible to the public, which requires interpretation, analysis, and stories. And nothing helps to convey the scale and importance of an event like historical comparison. Photographs of victims and body parts were rare, but it is also true that such images do not enable journalists to fulfill these professional objectives. Certain images consequently serve as icons and are repeatedly reproduced, providing, in the case of 9/11, an intuitive link to a historical « double », which in the American press was Pearl Harbor. The headlines and captions of photographs systematically referred to “A New Day of Infamy”, a new Pearl Harbor. Chéroux underscores this, asserting that “much more than a simple discursive convenience, this analogy became a veritable *idée fixe* in the days following the attacks”. According to him, the prominence of images of the explosions and of the World Trade Center towers collapsing in a cloud of smoke in the American press is explained by their mirroring of the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Chéroux maintains that while the images of 9/11 were repetitive, they also appear to be repeating something else at the same time, giving rise to a sensation of *déjà vu*, the key to the success of Thomas Franklin’s photograph “Ground Zero Spirit”, which captured three firefighters raising the American flag over the ruins of Ground Zero. This image blatantly mimics one of the most famous icons of American history, Joe Rosenthal’s “Flags of Our Fathers”, which shows six Marines planting the flag at the summit of Iwo Jima’s Mount Suribachi at the time of the US entry into the war after the Pearl Harbor attack. Thomas Franklin even admitted that he immediately thought of the famous shot while taking his photograph. Both pictures were circulated by the Associated Press and were the object of a dizzying number of derivative works, including statues; there is even a wax casting of the three firefighters at Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum in New York. Frequently appearing side-by-side (for example on the front page of the *Sun* of September 13, 2001 and in a puzzle marketed in 2002 by TDC Game), the link between the two images results in a hybrid representation, such as a plastic figurine representing the three New York firefighters in the posture of the Iwo Jima Marines.

Chéroux proposes inter-iconicity as a way to explain this phenomenon of iconic repetition between two images, modeling the concept on intertextuality as defined by Gérard Genette as “a revelation of co-presence between two or several texts, in other words eidetically and usually through the actual presence of one text within another”. According to

Ch roux, the images of Pearl Harbor are present within the images of New York, mirroring both the reality of the 9/11 events and these historic images. But inter-iconicity is neither mechanical nor univocal, and a connection that appears obvious in the United States is not necessarily as apparent in the rest of the world, and vice versa.

Reading 9/11 through the prism of Pearl Harbor was thus far less meaningful in Europe. The front pages of French newspapers, for example, contained the same image types as US papers, but they were distributed differently, with far fewer images of the explosion of Flight 175 (only 5% versus 41% in the United States), and more images of the ruins (30% in French front pages, with the same proportion depicting the smoke cloud). The images of smoke and the towers' collapse are not associated in the French press with Pearl Harbor, but with other bombed cities, most prominently Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Similarly, photographs of New Yorkers running terrified in the streets of Lower Manhattan against backgrounds of the huge smoke cloud raised by the collapse of the towers are occasionally likened to the famous photograph of Nick Ut taken on June 8, 1972 showing a young girl fleeing the Vietnamese village of Trang Bang in tears while it is being napalmed by the US Army. The headlines suggest a different kind of inter-iconicity, for example "Apocalypse Now" in the Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* or in the *Figaro Magazine* of October 11, 2001, whose cover also recalled Coppola's Vietnam War movie.

This European version of inter-iconicity, which associates memories of the Vietnam War with cities bombed by the Americans during the 20th century, can be seen as hinting that the New York attacks are a consequence of the suffering inflicted on the world by the United States, a way of "getting back at" the US. It can also be understood as an appeal for thoughtfulness in the response to the attacks, for a more pacifist than bellicose response. In any case, it illustrates the negative side of American inter-iconicity which, by symbolically connecting 9/11 and Pearl Harbor sets aside the entire second part of the 20th century and the various wars conducted during that period. Conversely, by invoking the memory of the last "just war", the association with Pearl Harbor unarguably helped generate the support of American public opinion for a military response to 9/11.

### **The effects of globalization on the mediatization of events**

It would nevertheless be a mistake to believe that the link with Pearl Harbor was orchestrated by the neo-conservatives in the White House, nor would it be appropriate to

believe that this association stems from something inherent in American culture. On the contrary, the fact that Pearl Harbor was so present in the Americans' minds and surfaced so spontaneously as a connection when other possible links were also possible is explained by the fact that 2001 was the sixtieth anniversary of the bombardment of Pearl Harbor. In fact, Americans had been saturated by this "commemorative show" since the previous January, media coverage estimated by Emily Rosenberg to have been 30% greater than for the fiftieth anniversary. The association between the photograph of the Ground Zero firefighters and that of the Iwo Jima Marines was even more obvious given the publication of James Bradley's *Flags of Our Fathers* a year earlier. This hugely successful book was on the bestseller lists through July, 2001, when it went into paperback, and in 2006 it was adapted to the cinema by Clint Eastwood. Furthermore, the top movie event of 2001 was a Hollywood blockbuster produced by the Disney Studios entitled *Pearl Harbor*. This enormously expensive production came out on May 30, 2001, less than four months before the attacks, and it shaped memories of Pearl Harbor as only the cultural industry *à l'américaine* can achieve, with a bigger advertising blitz than either *Jurassic Park* (1993) or *Titanic* (1998). These circumstances easily explain why not only World War Two veterans but *all* Americans came to have Pearl Harbor on their minds in September 2001. What the images of explosions and smoke clouds over Manhattan ultimately recall are less the archival images of Pearl Harbor than its over-blown contemporary representations, with special effects courtesy of Hollywood. This helps explain why many Americans thought they were watching a movie when they turned on their televisions on September 11, 2001...

Rather than simply concluding like numerous other authors that "reality is more amazing than fiction" or that Hollywood had foreseen it all, Chéroux goes further. He points out the fact that the very newspapers that published such a narrow range of 9/11 image-types belonged to multinational corporations also involved in the entertainment industry. These companies can be counted on the fingers of a single hand: AOL Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom, and Bertelsmann. Given this background, there is a logic underlying the fact that the Disney group's media in particular offered a reading of 9/11 that was heavily determined by *Pearl Harbor*, which had premiered only a few months earlier. The circulation of the iconic referent "Pearl Harbor" thus stems from a concrete connection between the entertainment and information industries.

This “closed-circuit” operation is more highly developed today than ever in the sense that the press photography market has also undergone profound reorganization in recent years. Most of the independent photo agencies (in France, for example, Sygma, Gamma, Sipa) have either disappeared or are seriously ailing, whereas agencies that are subsidiaries such as Reuters, Associated Press, and in France, the AFP, have strengthened their positions. As a consequence, out of 400 front pages, 299 are affiliated with the Associated Press. A few hours after the attacks, AP was already circulating its images to more than 15,000 subscribers in 112 countries, explaining why, while nothing anchors it particularly in European memories, 10% of the French front pages on the ensuing days posted the picture of the three firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero that AP had circulated. This included even the newspaper *Libération*, whose editorial line contrasted distinctly with the photograph’s patriotic tone. This provides a final explanation for the “9/11 paradox”, which is neither about state censorship nor journalistic self-censorship, but rather a matter of eco-censorship: the image types of 9/11 all came from the catalogue of press agencies that are subsidiaries of vast multinational groups that exert a hegemonic influence over the photojournalism market.

Although Chéroux took on the subject of 9/11 as a photographic historian, his book is in truth a sociological work. He approaches 9/11 as a holistic social event, revealing in the process the structures and deep trends in the society in which it took place. He employs 9/11 as a case study to expose the effects of standardization and uniformization exerted by economic and financial globalization on photographic and memorial representations. Even if it was not perceived identically around the globe, 9/11 was universally represented via the same images and interpreted via the same collective fund of “universal” memories in a Hollywoodian sauce. If it isn’t *Pearl Harbor*, well, why not *Apocalypse Now*? What Chéroux shows us along the way is fundamentally symptomatic of how any next media event is treated in a globalized world, as expressed in his book’s subtitle: “The Photographic Image in the Era of Globalized Media”.

An excellent example of this global mediatization is the attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004, described in the press as the “Spanish 9/11” or the “European 9/11”. The front pages of the world’s newspapers showed the same image of a gaping hole in a train caused by one of the explosions just before it pulled into the Atocha station. Among the press commentaries published in these newspapers, some drew a link between the gutted trains and

the perforated towers, as if the latter did anything but crumple horizontally. 9/11 thus became in turn an iconic referent...

*Diplopia* is a remarkable book from every point of view, as concise as it is precise, as exemplary in its rigor as in its inventiveness. One could complain that the inter-iconicity construct is not more solidly grounded theoretically and as refined as it certainly deserves. It could be applied to other case studies like the 2004 Tsunami, or the death of Pope John Paul II, in the spirit of the work already done by Barbie Zelizer concerning evocations of the Holocaust in the media treatment of the Rwandan genocide and the war in ex-Yugoslavia.

It is worth emphasizing that Chéroux does not speak without having anything important to say, which is rare in the 9/11 literature. Instead, he uses it to show how history is repeated among the media according to certain laws specifically studied by the sociology of collective memory. A sociologist like Maurice Halbwachs would certainly have appreciated this book very much, because it shows how the representations of an event find their explanation in a particular social morphology, in this instance, that of the media and information industries. This photographic historian has thus made a contribution whose reach goes well beyond his own discipline and will interest a broad readership. Eight years after 9/11, the time was apparently ripe for a deeper analysis of the event, and one can only hope that *Diplopia* opens the way for other books of similar quality.

### **For further reading...**

- About the televised treatment of 9/11 : Daniel Dayan (dir.), *La terreur spectacle : terrorisme et télévision*, Bruxelles, De Boeck/INA, 2006.
- About popular reactions to 9/11 : Béatrice Fraenkel, *Les écrits de septembre, New York 2001*, Paris, Textuel, 2002
- About the hypothesis of state censorship of media treatment of 9/11 : Christian Delage, « Une censure intériorisée ? Les premières images des attentats du 11 septembre 2001 », *Ethnologie française*, XXXVI, 2006, p.91-99 (<http://www.cairn.info/revue-ethnologie-francaise-2006-1-p-91.htm>).
- About the controversy triggered by Todd Maisel's photograph « The Hand » : Daniel Girardin et Christian Pirker (dir.), *Controverses. Une histoire juridique et éthique de la photographie*, Lausanne, Actes Sud / Musée de l'Élysée, 2008, p. 286-289.

- About the Pearl Harbor commemorations : Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live. Pearl Harbor in American Memory*, Durham, Londres, Duke University Press, 2003.
- About visual references to the Holocaust in the media treatment of other subjects : Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget. Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*, Chicago/Londres, University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- About the constructs of inter-iconicity and intertextuality: Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.
- About the sociology of memory : Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997 (1950).

#### On the Web:

- About the sensation of *déjà-vu* : Olivier Remaud, « Le déjà-vu, nostalgie contemporaine », 5 décembre 2007 : <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-deja-vu-nostalgie-contemporaine.html>
- A glimpse of the front pages analyzed by Chéroux : <http://www.poynterextra.org/extra/gallery/Extra1.htm> ; <http://www.september11news.com/>
- The digital archives of 9/11, including links to American and international Internet sites containing news reports from the days and weeks following 9/11 : <http://september11.archive.org/>; <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/lcwa/html/sept11/sept11-overview.html>
- Le Tribute WTC Visitor Center : <http://www.tributewtc.org>
- *Here is New York. A Democracy of Photographs* : <http://hereisnewyork.org>
- Tom Junod, « The Falling Man », *Esquire*, vol.140, n°3, septembre 2003 : [http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP\\_FALLINGMAN](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN)
- « Ground Zero Spirit » : <http://www.september11news.com/FDNYFireman.htm>
- « Flags of our Fathers » : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WW2\\_Iwo\\_Jima\\_flag\\_raising.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WW2_Iwo_Jima_flag_raising.jpg)

Translated by **John Angell** with the support of the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Published by [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 11 September 2009

© [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr)