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Recommended Citation
Boyles, Deron R., "A Lesson of Human Connection: 9/11, Film, Brotherhood, and Interpretation" (2003). *Educational Policy Studies Faculty Publications.* Paper 3.
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A LESSON OF HUMAN CONNECTION: 9-11, FILM, BROTHERHOOD, AND INTERPRETATION

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9/11
I have always liked the voice of rain:
The susurrus of a drizzly mist,
The clatter of a tropic downpour.
The white noise of an all-day storm.

But last night I heard another that I didn't like at all:

The crack of flesh upon concrete,
Percussion of bodies fallen from sky,
The testament of choosing air over fire,

Will we ever find peace under roofs again?

Perhaps not under roofs,
But no day is entirely dark,
Where brothers look after brothers,
And there is selfless love.

Bob Camba[1]

Brothers Gedeon and Jules Naudet were within two blocks of the World Trade Center (WTC) on the morning of September 11, 2001 when terrorists flew hijacked planes into the WTC towers. Both brothers had cameras with them, as they were engaged in shooting a documentary film about firefighters at the time. As a result, they captured unique footage from the area, including the only images from inside Tower 1, where firefighters were trying to get a handle on the situation. The footage includes sounds of falling bodies and scenes of firefighters trying to escape from Tower 1 after Tower 2 had collapsed. Both Jules and Gedeon were within blocks of Tower 1 when it collapsed, and escaped injury. CBS aired the Naudet brothers' film on March 10, 2002. Over 39 million people watched. This essay explores the extraordinary footage and the insights the film brings to viewers regarding human connection and interpretation. Questions are raised regarding the perspectives represented in the film (and those perspectives not in the film). Questions also surround the competing meanings made of the film and the effort here is to partly lay out those competing interpretations in order to open a dialogue about human connections–their meanings, interpretations, generalizability, and importance (or lack thereof).

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Of ultimate interest for this essay are questions about time and timing (i.e., being the wrong place at the wrong time [or right place at the wrong time. . .or, etc.]), non- or supra-sentient existence (instinctive, quasi-cognizant actions like sensing when to escape a building and what and how to film during such a catastrophe), and the bonds of brotherhood stretched and ultimately strengthened by perseverance, serendipity, unique human connection, or something else completely. In effect, this essay explores different interpretations of the film that captured what the Naudet brothers faced and endured. This essay is not focused on whether the attacks were justified given multiple perspectives or whether the United States is a globalizing, imperialist force. These issues may run through any analysis, or attempt at analysis, of 9-11, yet the focus here is on the remarkable facts surrounding a fire company, its "probie," and the two French film makers–all of whom survived the events of September 11, 2001. What, if anything, can the story within the story (or the story *of* the story) of "9/11" tell us? The film itself was set in three acts: life inside the firehouse before the tragedy, the events that transpired at the WTC, and the wait at the firehouse after the event to see who would come back alive. This essay begins with a narrative of the film, then moves to interpretations of the film, and ultimately raises questions about human connection, the Naudet brothers, and the role of criticality in viewing film. Criticality and interpretation are put forward as necessary components of U.S. schooling.

The Film

Brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet began filming their documentary in 2001 about 23-year old "probie" (probationary) firefighter Tony Benetatos, of New York's Engine 7, Ladder Company 1. The originally stated intent of the documentary was to follow a probie through, in this case, his first year on the job to capture the process they described as a "kid becoming a man in nine months."[2] The story centered on the probie's routines (cleaning, cooking, and basically waiting), the life within the firehouse, and the hierarchy within the organization. Probies, it was pointed out, are either "white clouds" or "black clouds." To be a "white cloud" means that no major fires happens during the initial tenure of a probie, whereas a "dark cloud" means there are many fires or a major fire during the probie's beginning stint as a firefighter. Benetatos was called a "white cloud," because for the first two months of his probationary period (July and August) there were no major fires–in fact only one small car fire during the entire two-month period. The documentary highlights firefighters worrying, in storied or lore-like fashion, that when a "white cloud" is around too long, the company becomes concerned that a large or major fire is imminent. The documentary shows Benetatos increasingly anxious to prove himself and move on with the probationary period. The documentary also shows how the Naudet brothers interacted with the firemen. At various times the film shows

the brothers interviewing firemen, observing their routines, and even taking their turn at cooking a meal for the entire company.

At around 8:30 a.m. on the morning of September 11, 2001, the fire company got a call concerning a gas leak. Jules Naudet followed Battalion Chief Joseph Pfeiffer as he led a small group of men from the firehouse to the site of the leak. While Jules is out with the group of firefighters, at around 8:45 a.m., the sound of a low flying plane overhead caught his attention and he turned his camera to the sky. It was just as the first plane struck the North Tower (or Tower 1) of the World Trade Center. Jules' footage is the only known footage of the first plane hitting Tower 1. At 9:00 a.m., a second plane hit the South Tower (Tower 2).

After the first plane struck Tower 1, the men at the gas leak site and all of the on-duty firefighters from Engine 7, Ladder Company 1 rushed to the scene. Jules shadowed the battalion chief as he led the group from the gas leak site to the lobby of Tower 1. Benetatos, the probie, was ordered to stay at the firehouse to answer phone calls and watch the station. During this time, Gedeon Naudet stayed with Benetatos at the firehouse. Gedeon captures the nervousness of Benetatos and his frustration at not being able to be with the rest of the firefighters on the scene. When retired fire chief Larry Burns shows up at the firehouse, he convinces Benetatos to leave the firehouse and join in the rescue operation. Gedeon was asked to bring gloves to Benetatos. When Gedeon returns with the gloves, Burns and Benetatos are already gone. Gedeon is then left on his own and he decides, partly out of worry for his brother, to go to the site of the fires. He has to hitch a ride with off-duty firefighters rushing to the scene in a pickup truck. In the process he also captures scenes of the destruction from outside the WTC towers–scenes that are ultimately merged with Jules' footage from inside the WTC.

In the lobby of Tower 1, Jules enters with the rest of the firefighters to find a woman on fire. Viewers of the documentary hear the woman screaming, but Jules decides not to film her. She later died. "Two people were on fire. The image was so terrible, I made the decision not to film them," Jules was noted as saying after the documentary was screened.[3] What Jules did capture was the scene of fire chiefs, calm if confused, trying to set up a command center in the lobby and attempting to make sense of the situation. While the command center is being set up, the film shows some firefighters ascending stairs, while others await specific orders. Windows in the lobby of Tower 1 are broken and it is surmised that huge fireballs descended the elevator shafts at the time of impact, thus blowing out the windows and rendering the elevators inoperable. During the time the chiefs are trying to set up their command center, the second plane hits Tower 2. What was already a difficult situation now has the added element of firefighters not knowing what is actually going on around them. At this time

in the film, there is the surprising sight of an elevator opening with a load of visibly shaken people coming down from Tower 1. They are immediately escorted out of the building, but this task is not as easy as it might first appear.

As the film shows people exiting the building, viewers of the documentary hear loud, sharp, crashing sounds. Those watching the film never see the cause of the sounds, but firefighters do. People are jumping out of the tower and landing on the ground below. "That's how bad it was," said a fireman in a voiceover for the documentary. "The best option was to jump."[4]

Jules also films Father Mychal Judge, the fire department's highly regarded chaplain. Judge had been shown alternately praying and anxiously consulting those who approached him. Suddenly, there is a tremendously loud sound and tremor. Debris is falling and dust is engulfing the area. Tower 2 (the South Tower), the second structure hit, collapsed. What had been calm confusion now turns to panicked chaos. The firefighters shout at one another and bolt toward a covered exit, rather than the front door of the lobby, so as not to risk being hit by falling bodies and debris. Another realization: Father Judge has been killed. They retrieve Judge's body as the ash and soot and dust turn the picture black. Jules' camera, it turns out, helps the situation because the bright floodlight on it provides the best light source amid the ash and dust. The light helps show the men the way out of the building. Jules is constantly wiping the lens of his camera as it repeatedly becomes clouded in dust and ash.

While the men exit the building and get outside, only a few minutes later they hear another rumble–Tower 1, the building they had just occupied, collapses. As the men are fleeing the scene, Jules' camera is seen being knocked sideways and viewers hear him falling, hitting the ground, and being muffled by someone on top of him. Chief Pfeiffer, it turns out, tackled Jules, pushing him under a car while the debris of Tower 1 engulfed them. Jules grimly noted in the documentary that he felt at that point that he was going to die. He also noted that he thought to himself that if he lived, he would be a better brother.

While Jules is filming, so is Gedeon. He is pointing his camera and providing narrative as buildings are collapsing and people are running out of the WTC area. The commentary in the film distinguishes three distinct times on one street (the street running from Engine 7 to the WTC). In the first footage, Gedeon captured people from all over the world. The streets were full of people pointing at the towers and conversing with one another. The second distinct time is when the street was full of people running away. The final time was when the very same street was empty and full of dust and ash. At one point after the streets were deserted, Gedeon tries to make his way to the WTC, believing that his brother was in one of the towers that collapsed. He is stopped twice: one time Gedeon pleads with a policeman to let him get closer to the buildings and offers him a letter (presumably confirming that he is filming a documentary

about firefighters); the second time a policeman is clearly annoyed that Gedeon has a camera. In the first instance the policeman is heard to say "take your letter and camera and get out of here." In the second instance, Gedeon is told that "this ain't f***ing Disneyland." Gedeon is then left to wander around the streets with the remaining number of other ash-covered people. He films part of a plane engine blocks away from the WTC. He also films people making their way out of the disaster area--some crying, some screaming, but all with various expressions of shock on their faces. Gedeon knows that his brother was with the firefighters and he also knows that the towers have collapsed. He talks openly during the filming of various scenes about his worry and concern regarding his brother and the firemen from Ladder 1.

Jules also continues filming, not knowing the fate of Gedeon, the firefighters not around him, or Benetatos, the probie. Jules makes his way back to the firehouse and as he is still filming, the documentary shows the slow trickle of firemen returning to the firehouse. With each person's return, there is relief mixed with jubilation, shock and sorrow, but the firefighters ultimately realize that the probie they left to watch the firehouse is not there–and neither is Gedeon. Worry replaces some of the joy as time continues to go by, but Gedeon ultimately returns and is reunited with Jules. When the film makers are reunited, they are the ones filmed–holding one another and weeping. The last person shown returning is Benetatos. Every person from Ladder 1 survived the ordeal.

The Interpretations

CBS aired the documentary March 10, 2002 and again on September 11, 2002. Prior to March 10, there was a screening of the film and there was considerable news coverage. Questions were raised about the timing. Was it too soon? Was it too late? Questions were also raised about the content. How graphic would it be? Would the considerable number of usually-bleeped "curse words" be edited? Questions were raised about the commercial aspect of the event. Would there be commercials? Were people profiting from showing the documentary? In the end, the questions about timing were answered individually. In terms of graphic detail, no bodies, nobody jumping from buildings, and no focus on body parts would be included. Regarding curse words, no editing out of any word–a first for network television. The commercial question was partly answered. The sponsor of the airing continually plugged itself by using its name (Nextel), but there were only three short breaks in the film, not counting the opening and closing credits, and no traditional commercials.

After the film aired, interpretations of the documentary varied considerably. Many who were worried about the film, i.e., worried about reliving the tragedy and opening old wounds, were often surprised. Noted Marc Peyser, a writer for *Newsweek*, "At its best, '9/11' is as close to a feel-good movie as it can be, considering the tragic cloth from which it is made. Not that it's always

easy to watch. The 45-or-so minutes spent inside the Trade Center–really just the lobby of the North Tower–are among the most nerve-wracking you'll ever spend watching TV. But it is time well spent."[5] Ron Scott, a documentary film maker from Detroit considered it "a little bit sensationalistic at this particular time, when people still have the impact of war footage coming home and the vitriolic furor against Arab-Americans. I think people need time to heal. It's a little bit insensitive to the families and victims. . . .Nobody will ever know when these people see their family members blown up again what sort of psychological impact that will have. I know in any documentary that I've done I've tried to respect the wishes of people involved."[6]

A *Washington Times* editorial printed after the documentary aired put it this way:

> Long before September 11, Jules and Gedeon Naudet. . . set out to film the story of a rookie fireman. That September 11 happened during their rookie's probationary period obviously changed the narrative as they had expected to shoot it. But if the narrative structure changed, the narrative focus didn't. Or, rather, the Naudet brothers chose not to let it. Regrettably, "9/11" conveys no sense of connection between the attack on the World Trade Center and the "attack" on the United States. In other words, there is little or no mention that this atrocity was an act of war that led this country to mobilize its armies and jump-start an international coalition against global terrorism. No "Support Our Guys in Afghanistan" message here. No Afghanistan, either. The absence of a broader context is disorienting. In many ways, "9/11" never reaches beyond the story of the day the men of Engine 7 Ladder 1 had to fight a really, really big fire.[7]

One might be tempted to note the conservatism of the *Washington Times* and consider the editorial as a means to spotlight national defense, respect for the armed forces, and national pride (if not xenophobia). Yet, the *Washington Times* interpretation of the Naudet brothers' film is not unique. Diana West, of the *Jewish World Review* noted that "Out of almost 3,000 deaths at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 343 were firemen. But Sept. 11 was also the worst day of all our lives as Americans, and in the relentlessly intimate focus of '9/11' there is no glimpse of this national grief, or the resolve to fight back that which was born of it."[8]

Beyond the concern regarding the lack of a larger context in which to place "9/11," other interpretations of the film question the degree to which "9/11" is actually a documentary. Writes Chris Rywalt, "I am angry at the manipulation of the film makers Jules and Gedeon Naudet. . . and presumably their producers and editors. This is what they do in their film: They show us

Probie firefighter Tony Benetatos before September 11th, as the Naudet brothers were making their film on becoming a firefighter in New York City. And we see interview segments after September 11th with other men from the station, but nothing from the Probie. Over and over, it is stressed that he's never been tested, never seen a fire. Over and over they foreshadow what is coming, even though we all know what is coming. And we keep seeing other men from the station after the fact, but the Probie, he's only there in old footage from before September 11th. Does he die? What do you think? Of course you think he dies. And then, after the attacks, when everyone but the Probie has returned to the station house, and we really think he's dead–then he returns at last, and then the film makers show us him in after-the-fact footage."[9] Rywalt goes on:

> This is shameless. As if September 11th needed to have some human-sized tension added. As if we needed to be thinking about the fate of this one handsome young hero-with-a-capital-H because we couldn't really feel the violent deaths of the tens of hundreds of nameless office workers. Just like the sinking of the Titanic and the bombing of Pearl Harbor needed romantic triangles to make them worthwhile and interesting, we needed to wonder if this one Probie firefighter would make it out alive.[10]

Aside from the larger question of context, then, Rywalt argues that lines were blurred between the film being a documentary and a made-for-television special event. Was it really a documentary? How much editing (and of what kind) does it take to turn a documentary into a docu-drama? What did Robert DeNiro offer, aside from overly-dramatic introductions to different scenes? Differently, but related, Marc Peyser called the sounds of human bodies falling and hitting the ground "the most chilling *sound effects* ever heard on television."[11] Sound effects? Is that what they were? Did the Naudet brothers use the sound of falling bodies as sound effects? I'll assert that they did not, but it is of interest to me to ask about the editing and the degree to which the probie's triumphant return to the firehouse was used in a manipulative way to heighten viewers' emotional sense of the "made for television" ending: of all of the death and destruction, nobody from Engine 7, Ladder 1 was even seriously injured.

The Brothers

Still, having seen the documentary and having viewed the reunion of the two brothers, it is difficult for me to conclude or assert that, for example, Jules and Gedeon used the sound of falling bodies as sound effects. In this sense, the brothers are both filming and filmed. They are capturing unique footage of a catastrophic event and at the same time, as a result of their capturing the footage, become captured, too. Theirs is a story-line within the film, as well, in other words...and in a way that arguably they would not have been in the original version of the "probie" documentary. Yes, they were present during scenes.

Yes, they were participant-observers, if you like. But the moment the first plane slammed into Tower 1 and Jules Naudet shadowed Chief Pfeiffer, intentionality changed. It merged with instinct and interpretation, often at the same time.

Recall, for example, the moment Jules entered the lobby of Tower 1. There were at least two people on fire. One woman is heard screaming on the film. Jules didn't point his camera in her direction. Instinctive? Interpretative? Both? Neither? I wonder whether his actions don't dispel at least some of the criticism he and Gedeon received. That is, if the accusations of exploitative, paparazzi-like filming were true (in this example, anyway), wouldn't Jules actually shoot the footage, if only to edit it out later? Of course we do not know for certain that he did not edit any such coverage in the scene, even though viewers of the documentary see the camera being averted.

This is perhaps part of what I'm trying to get at in the title of this paper. The Naudet brothers admittedly were making a film. Yet, the film was originally about a comparatively mundane subject: the process of becoming a firefighter. Given the goal of getting to know, broadly speaking, another human being (Benetatos) and, partly as a result, cultivating human connections with the entire firehouse prior to September 11th, what I find intriguing is the twist of serendipity that highlighted and focused on and, yes, intensified the human connections made between the film makers, their subjects, and ultimately an audience never imagined by the Naudet brothers. Uncannily scripted-but-not-scripted, the film *does* play out like a Disney movie, and this might be the relevance, if not importance, of "9/11" in terms of philosophizing pedagogy after September 11th.

Unlike any other film, I assert that the Naudet brothers provide us with an attention-grabbing platform for the very kind of critical inquiry missing in many (if not most) pedagogical spheres. They highlight not only human connection and brotherhood (with all of its vagaries and idiosyncrasies, saccharine overgeneralizations and quirky interpretations), they also highlight the hard-to-fathom-but-ever-present serendipity that is beaten out of things like classroom interaction. A perverse stretch, I admit, I nonetheless want to make (or force) a connection between the happenstance illustrated by Jules Naudet's capturing the first plane hitting Tower 1 and the quest for certainty present not only in most schools, but (not surprisingly) in society writ large.

The stretch, then, is one between a realist take on metaphysics coupled with humanist constructions of meaning, including the very idealist metaphysics that support supernatural explanatory frameworks–and become the foundation for human actions like flying planes into skyscrapers *and* making meaning of such actions in the aftermath. Post-September 11th, I could not (and cannot, given the recent anniversary) get around the irony that the tragedy highlighted the very kind of uncertainty I think is a very real condition of humanity, but in the utmost of non-humanitarian contexts. When people sought meaning from

the events of September 11th, I wonder if they weren't unwittingly (if understandably) questing for the very kind of certitude upon which the terrorists based their actions.

I'm left, as usual, with more questions than answers, and I fear that the multiple layers of meaning that can be gleaned from "9/11" further thwart inquiry, either because of the messy nature of the questions (something avoided in many school classrooms, too) or because the analysis treads too closely to being an episode on the new "Dr. Phil" show. I simply think it worthy to pay attention to the Naudet brothers' film–because of what it captures, because of what it represents, and because it provides us so many opportunities for investigation and critique. In terms of pedagogy, one has to be concerned about the psychological effects viewing the film might have on various ages of students. One should also be concerned about what Kathleen Knight-Abowitz called "the masculine and patriarchal constructions of hero that emerge" from the film.[12] Indeed, her concern is that firefighters became martyred but that "firefighter" is used only out of feminist principles. She writes, "I was watching the buddy camaraderie of the firehouse captured by the Naudet brothers and thinking, 'these guys have a nice, family-type atmosphere. It looks cozy and wholesome. But what do they do with the lady firefighters? What happens [when] a gay firefighter makes his application to this house?'"[13] That said, what better film to use as a means of inquiry into the various elements captured, symbolized, and represented (as well as not captured, not symbolized, and not represented)? How many can we fathom? Yes, there is the math and science of building construction and destruction. There is also the social and science aspects of communication (radios that did not work well for fireman, on-site film, voyeur/informational coverage by news media, people speculating on the street, etc.), the obvious religious and political components, and the not-so-obvious (or not-so-easily-recognized/discussed) elements of gender, economics, and imperialism. The film is not unproblematic–all the better for a society that seeks simple answers (and all too often in response to intricate and complicated topics [globalization, environmental issues, religion, gender, schooling, etc.]). This film does, however, offer an opportunity to highlight the potential of schools beyond rote lessons and traditionally separated subjects.

Notes

1. Bob Camba, "9/11," [online], in *Joshuart*; [cited 17 September 2002]; available from http://joshuart.com/; INTERNET.

2. Sondra Levin, "Homegrown Firefighter Subject of Historic 9/11 Documentary," *Bronx Times Reporter* [online], 4 April 2002 [cited 16 September 2002]; available from http://www.bxtimes.com/News/2002/0404/Front_Page/051.html; INTERNET.

3. Commentary, "9/11 Documentary,"[online]; [cited 15 September 2002]; available from http://pub3.ezboard.com/ftruksludgefrm24.showMessage?topicID=154.topic; INTERNET.

4. Marc Peyser, "If Only It Were Just A Movie: The CBS Documentary '9/11' is Riveting and Surprisingly Poignant," [online]; in *MSNBC News*, 8 March 2002–[cited 17 September 2002]; available from http://www.msnbc.com/news/721308; INTERNET.

5. Ibid.

6. Ron Scott, cited in Tom Long, "Healing or Haunting? Six Months After Terrorist Attacks, CBS Documentary '9/11' May Shed New Light–Or Open Old Wounds," [online]; in *The Detroit News*, 8 March 2002–[cited 16 September 2002]; available from http://detnews.com/2002/entertainment/0203/10/d01-435103.htm; INTERNET.

7. House Editorial, "9/11,"[onine]; in *The Washington Times*, 12 March 2002–[cited 18 September 2002; available from http://asp.washtimes.com/printarticle.asp?action=print&ArticleID=20020212-4980282; INTERNET.

8. Diana West, "The Tunnel Vision of '9/11,'"[online]; in *Jewish World Review*, 15 March 2002–[cited 17 September 2002]; available from http://www/.jewishworldview.com/0302/west0302/west031502.asp; INTERNET.

9. Chris Rywalt, "Coming of Age on September 11,"[online]; in *TeeVee 13*, March 2002–[cited 20 September 2002]; available from http://www.teevee.org/archive/2002/03/13/; INTERNET.

10. Ibid.

11. Peyser, op.cit., emphasis added.

12. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Philosophizing Pedagogy After 9/11: Respondent Remarks," paper presented at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, September 27-28, 2002, p. 4.

13. Ibid.