

Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Chronic Aftershock: How 9/11 Shaped Present-Day France*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 276 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 CAN (hb). ISBN 978022800865.

Review by Derek W. Vaillant, University of Michigan.

Readers of *H-France* will likely have played the question-and-answer game, "Where were you when...?" It is a common participatory activity in which a group of people share where they were and what they were doing when they received word of momentous national, international, or global events. By design, the ritual is inclusive, since it draws from the vast pool of mediated images and stories punctuating our evermore instantaneously interconnected social worlds and the omnipresence of the U.S. and other national media industries of the last half century. It can be playful, serious, or both. In 1977, music writer Lester Bangs asked readers of New York's *Village Voice* "Where were you when Elvis died?"[1] The rhetorical question yielded a brilliant personal essay from one of the best cultural observers of his era about the fate of icons amid the flattened landscape of late twentieth-century America. More recently, social scientists Daniel Dayan and the late Elihu Katz coined the term "media events" to differentiate the quotidian events filling the daily national news hole from those that are immediately "proclaimed historic" and typically include extensive live broadcasting. They theorized these as modern embodiments of participatory anthropological ceremonies of collective witness.[2]

Prior to September 11, 2001, when Americans were asked to name the most important historical event they had witnessed in their lifetimes from the age of eight to the present, they most frequently evoked President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Ninety-five percent of those eight years of age or older on November 22, 1963, remembered where they were, and what they were doing, when they heard of the president's murder. No other event came close until 9/11. Of the U.S. population eight years of age or older on that fateful day, 97% could remember where they were or what they were doing when they heard about the attacks on America that killed nearly 3,000 people and ninety percent mentioned television as the source of the news.[3]

The annual 9/11 memorialization ceremonies in the United States demonstrate that the events of that day and the indelible images associated with it continue to stir strong emotions and are seen to have fundamentally altered the course of history. The perspective of 9/11 as a "radical break" from the past, in Jean-Philippe Mathy's phrase (p. 30), registers in unique qualities of a media event with the abundance and intensity of television images and photographs of spectacular destruction, mass death, mass trauma, inspiring bravery, and paroxysms of grief, anger, and incomprehension. The time-bounded inventory of 9/11 imagery supported an ideological interpretation of the meaning of the attacks that day as acute, rather than chronic, a literal thunder clap on a clear blue day, which by the episode-centered logic of the imagery separated 9/11 from America's prior history with terrorism and the Middle East, and disallowed (at least for a time) concerted efforts to insert 9/11 into a complex history within which the United States would come under direct attack from Islamist terrorists and would face ongoing threat of further attacks.

In France, Jean-Marie Colombani's response in *Le Monde* "We Are All Americans" began the task of journalists, intellectuals, politicians and others to render the attacks commensurate with the history of French-U.S. relations and currents of what Mathy calls "Gallic anti-Americanism." "The challenge inherent in any attempt to make sense of the event," writes Mathy, "would involve [...] its radical novelty on the one hand and on the other, the possibility to frame the catastrophe within some kind of discursive logic" (p. 30).[4] The tortuous process that followed amid the repeat shocks of domestic Islamist terror in France comprise the fascinating journey the author takes us on to document the public conversation involving many kinds of thinkers and actors in the public sphere, including the French and continental critics and philosophers who made foundational contributions to efforts to make sense of 9/11 in the U.S. as part of the subfield of 9/11 studies.

*Chronic Aftershock* casts 9/11 as both "an American *and* a global event, in large part because its occurrence immediately coincided with its representation, as images of the impact of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center were broadcast worldwide mere minutes after it happened" (p. 1). Themes of visual representation, mimesis, and simulation inspired theoretical responses to 9/11 coming out of France and elsewhere. The mediatization of 9/11 afforded its own critical instrumentation to be deconstructed as a critical mode of reading American power and this unprecedented stress test. Mathy alludes to these influential accounts and frameworks, but ops not to include illustrations or images of 9/11 or "the French 9/11" and subsequent attacks in France. One can rationalize such a decision. Given the ubiquity of images of 9/11, perhaps to include examples of them or of the attacks in Paris would appear gratuitous. On the other hand, given the status of 9/11 as a global media event, and the extensive mediatization that grabbed (and still grabs) viewers by the shirtfront, and piqued the interest of theorists seeking to make sense of the visceral effects of 9/11 as witnessed in North America and France, the absence of images raises essential questions for a comparative historian of U.S.-French broadcasting, such as myself. Accounting for the sensory spectrum of text, image, and sound promises to bring us closer to conceptualizing their differential effects in the past and the present. Themes of circulation and asymmetrical abundance and scarcity of mediated information are likewise salient when addressing national and transnational features of communication and media history.[5]

The French 9/11 was an available news peg employed in France and elsewhere in the aftermath of the jihadist murder of staffers at *Charlie Hebdo* and shoppers at a Parisian kosher market in January 2015, which pitted Islamist violence against civilians. The images of terror and shock joined scenes of mass peaceful marches across the country and appeals for solidarity (*Je suis Charlie*). As Mathy explains, virtually from its inception, the trope proved problematic and failed to produce critical traction as terror attacks continued. "From January to the aftermath of the November tragedy, there occurred a significant change in the meaning ascribed to mass violence as well as a growing deficit of its readability" (p. 221). Among the obstacles to rendering the French 9/11 intelligible in terms of 9/11 were stark differences in the production and circulation of the images of the terror attacks themselves, which were more abundant and widely circulated by an order of magnitude in the case of 9/11 relative to those of the 2015 attacks, but which further, in the French case, could not clarify or generate much consensus about a unified path forward for France as far as a neatly packaged answer to the origin of the attacks, the rationale of the terrorists themselves, or any sense of an appropriate response in their wake. With important differences, 9/11 and the French 9/11 shocked Americans and the French into fleeting affinity and unity (public rituals of grieving, affirmations

of democratic principles/respect for cultural difference/the Republic). In the U.S. case, a fearsome retribution followed the attacks, which rapidly divided Americans, and recently culminated with a majority supporting troop withdrawals and concluding that the U.S. policy in Afghanistan was a failure. In France, the qualitatively different nature of the attacks on sectors of the French population and their continuation produced more images of death and trauma, as well as peaceful resistance, but by their diachronic nature added an element absent from 9/11 as a bounded, legible, and actionable episode (violent and catastrophically harmful to many innocents as those actions proved to be). Images do not drive history, but they do bear a communicative and cultural momentum, which under specific circumstances can be wielded by political and intellectual actors to deliver preferred meanings to image consumers.

In the summer of 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, published an investigation of the events of September 11, 2001, in what would be known as the *The 9/11 Report*. “In the post-9/11 world,” it read, “threats are defined more by the fault lines within societies than by the territorial boundaries between them.”[6] The insight holds continued relevance to the challenges facing the United States, which remains under the shadow of future terror attacks. It also captures one of the painful ways in which 9/11 has shaped present-day France as terror attacks can open new social fault lines while also stressing existing ones. It seems clear enough reading *Chronic Aftershock* that a media event-centered account of the French 9/11 can illuminate a contrast between the U.S. and French media systems as well as the intelligibility that images can and cannot impart on catastrophic national experiences. The arbitrary coherence of 9/11 as a day of concentrated terror and image capture contrasts sharply with the shape-shifting quality of domestic terror attacks and their mediatization. The French 9/11 proved inadequate on its own for making sense of either 9/11 or the events befalling France in 2015 and after. Works such as *Chronic Aftershock* underscore, however, a need for revisiting such tropes, as they indeed register the manner in which media events are part of the perpetual motion of history and memory operating within and across national boundaries. The accessibility of remembered images and the traction they afford in games of “Where were you when...?” can illuminate, but only insofar as they mark a warmup to grappling with the questions to follow concerning meaning, contingencies, and responsibility for actions taken by individuals and governments.

## NOTES

[1] Lester Bangs, “How Long Will We Care,” *The Village Voice*, August 29, 1977, 1.

[2] Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3] Drew Desilver, “More Than a Decade Later, 9/11 Attacks continue to Resonate with Americans,” Pew Research Center, May 14, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/14/more-than-a-decade-later-911-attacks-continue-to-resonate-with-americans/>.

[4] Jean-Marie Colombani, “Nous sommes tous Américains,” *Le Monde*, September 13, 2001, 1.

[5] Derek Vaillant, *Across the Waves : How the United States and France Shaped the International Age of Radio* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017). This work considers the coevolution of

U.S. and French radio as cultural infrastructure against the backdrop of U.S.-French relations in the twentieth century.

[6] The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), p. 361, <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.

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