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Investigative Aesthetics in the American Studies Classroom: Approaching 9/11 through Alejandro González Iñárritu's *11'09"1: September 11*

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces and explores the implementation, potential, and challenges of investigative aesthetics, a methodology established by the interdisciplinary Forensic Architecture Network, as a specific didactic method in the realm of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom, more specifically in the teaching or, rather, learning of 9/11. Investigative aesthetics is particularly suited to the hermeneutic inquiry of 9/11 because, as Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman emphasize, it is an anti-hegemonic approach to knowledge-production which acknowledges that the "capacity for collective sensing and sense-making" enables a collective to "work towards a renewed, careful, but politically powerful conception of truth practices" (4). By employing a multiplicity of methods, skills, and literacies, the methodology is inherently interdisciplinary. However, as its implementation also poses challenges, the article discusses the use of Alejandro González Iñárritu's short film in *11'09"1: September 11* (2002) as an accessible and low-threshold version of investigative aesthetics. By staging eleven minutes of (almost) visual silence, the film neither fits the dominant narratives and iconography of 9/11 nor lends itself to easy interpretations. Instead, its analysis requires a critical holistic, transnational approach, a reflection of presences and absences, a consideration of material involvements, and an openness of the learners to attune their senses to perceive and experience the film as an aesthetic object. The short film exemplifies the effects of shifting the sensibilities and of playing with different modes of perception, thus allowing the learners to simultaneously encounter the effect of 9/11 footage while also critically engaging with its aftermath.

KEYWORDS
Forensic architecture, aesthetic education, teaching 9/11, media studies

"The anti-hedonistic quality of art is the tendency that experience of it leads away from the subject."
—Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics* 239

In her 2017 *Manifesto for Slow Science*, Isabelle Stengers addresses future directions for institutional knowledge production that counter the accelerating tendencies in scientific practices and calls for a recognition of the interrelations inherent in the emergence of knowledge, present and absent positions, questions, and material involvements. By putting her "trust . . . in the plurality of reclaiming operations and the ways in which they may connect, weaving relations with and learning from each other" (139), she envisions knowledge production as a democratic, materialist, and pluralistic practice that remains critically aware of power-knowledge nexuses, thus demanding that researchers explore their object of study holistically. Her book, however, does not just respond to a desire to frame scholarly practices and outline axioms that should govern knowledge production, but her approach is also driven by the timely questions of citizen science – questions of how the knowledge that is produced in the infamous "ivory tower" should also be accessible and publicly understandable (1).[1] Besides these desiderata of academic practices that Stengers brings up and that might resonate with many researchers whose work is increasingly influenced by the pressures of competition and innovation, Irina Bauder-Begerow and Stefanie Schäfer note that contemporary teaching at universities in countries of the European Union is urged by politics (and economic spokespersons) to focus more strongly on the development of key competences, those competences that comprise the oftentimes only vaguely framed dimensions of "comprehensive knowledge, transferable skills, and individual attitudes for a whole number of professions within a new paradigm of lifelong learning" (11).[2] Ideally, university teaching should thus be able to meet and

[1] Stengers explicitly argues that these public "matters of concern" – a phrase borrowed from Bruno Latour, which he uses in distinction to "matters of fact" – "incorporate[] . . . the idea that there are situations that concern us before they become objects of preoccupation or choice, situations which . . . demand that 'we feel concerned'" (3). Still, they are neither always politicized nor necessarily "arbitrary or contingent expression[s] of political engagement" (3). I do not fully agree with this assessment as the political has always been intimately entangled with the personal as well as the research conducted at universities. As much as one might like to adhere to an ideal of an impartial science, current political developments and political interferences with higher education and scholarship in the United States and elsewhere prove that holding on to such an ideal might not only be idealistic but outright dangerous.
[2] The Council of the European Union has identified eight key competences for lifelong learning in its eponymous framework in 2018: literacy competence, multilingual competence, mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering competence, digital competence, personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, and cultural awareness and expression competence (European Commission).

bridge all these challenges. While such a demand might represent an ideal that cannot – and maybe also should not – be met at all times,[3] there are certain topics that are especially prone to competence-oriented teaching in the American studies classroom, and the analysis of "9/11 texts and their negotiation of global, multi-cultural, many-voiced and plurisemiotic discourses," as Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer state in their introduction to the collected volume *Learning 9/11* (13), represents such a topic.

Moreover, these propositions for good scientific practices and teaching resonate well with the basic propositions of American studies, of the discipline's self-understanding as being democratic (Sielke 77), transnational (Pease; Waller), and interdisciplinary (Sielke 59). While there have been intensive debates about the methods of American studies, *teaching* American studies – and in doing so fostering these propositions – has not been (so much) at the forefront of academic scholarship (Oppermann 324), even though its significance for knowledge production is also encapsulated in a notion that most teacher-scholars would probably agree with, namely, as Uwe Küchler explains, that "[t]eaching is increasingly understood to be a context-sensitive form of learning, an exchange rather than a one-sided offer" (24).

Based on these preliminary considerations, this article explores the potential of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom, arguing that aesthetic education will help to implement more deeply the basic propositions of American studies. In doing so, my argument chimes in with the work of scholars such as Erica Fretwell and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, who argue that aesthetic education should be considered a form of sensitivity training as it attunes the learners towards heightened forms of perception. This article will explore the implementation, potential, and challenges of investigative aesthetics, a methodology established by the interdisciplinary Forensic Architecture Network and particularly cultural studies scholar Matthew Fuller and architect Eyal Weizman, as a specific didactic method in the realm of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom and specifically in the teaching or, rather, learning of 9/11. As the negotiation of the historical event's cultural, political, historical, national, and transnational meaning cannot be disconnected from the devastation of that day, teaching 9/11 and its aftermath continues to pose a challenge. Investigative aesthetics, as I will discuss, is particularly suited to the hermeneutic inquiry of 9/11 because, as Fuller and Weizman maintain, it "seeks to challenge established formations of power over always complicated questions of truth" (19) by "develop[ing] both a focus on the political dimensions of sensation and feeling as they

[3] Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer in reference to Marlène Iseli's article "Schüsselkompetenzen im Studium – Eine erfreuliche Begleiterscheinung?" note that the question of the training of key competences in university education is oftentimes rather settled on as a "pleasant by-product" than an intended learning outcome (12). Reservations regarding key competences might also result from a widespread distrust towards the forced implementation in higher education and an ongoing debate over the transformation of the humanities to cater to economic demands (Chur 54, 56).

are crystallised in specific incidents, and also the experimental multiplication of what counts as sensors and sensing" (201).

In this article, an introduction to investigative aesthetics sets the stage for examining how its possibilities and limitations shape its use in the American studies classroom. Finally, I will argue that Alejandro González Iñárritu's contribution to the film *11'09"1: September 11* (2002) provides learning opportunities that connect to Stengers's ideas, train key competences, and implement an accessible and low-threshold version of investigative aesthetics. By staging eleven minutes of (almost) visual silence, the film neither fits the dominant narratives and iconography of 9/11 nor lends itself to easy interpretations. Instead, its analysis requires a critical holistic, transnational approach, a reflection of presences and absences, and a consideration of material involvements just as much as an openness of the learners to attune their senses to perceive and experience the film as an aesthetic object.

Investigative Aesthetics

According to Fuller and Weizman, investigative aesthetics is an anti-hegemonic approach to knowledge production which acknowledges that the "capacity for collective sensing and sense-making" enables a collective, or commons, to "work towards a renewed, careful, but politically powerful conception of truth practices" (4). It has developed as a sub-methodology of forensics, which focuses on the holistic analysis of objects that are given an evidential value in a court of law. In forensics, simply put, the object of analysis (such as a bone or an instrument allegedly used in the commission of a crime) assumes the role of an actant that is, figuratively speaking, "telling" the experts about its role in a crime. These experts then not only take the role of examiners, but they also function as translators who build an interpretive bridge between the language of the object and the audience (Keenan and Weizman 38–39).[4] Hence, forensics is concerned with technical procedures and examinations that can generate new narratives from the object of study. Still, it is not just a technical and scientific procedure, but it bears political, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions and intricacies (Keenan and Weizman 13). This intersection renders it also valuable for aesthetic education in the American studies classroom.

While a common modern use of the term of aesthetics implies that this branch of philosophy is concerned with matters of beauty, investigative aesthetics builds on the ancient Greek conception of *aisthesis* as the theory of the sensual, embodied perception of the world. Closely related to processes of cognition and particularly significant

[4] In *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics*, Keenan and Weizman sketch the evolution and workings of modern forensics by outlining the case of Josef Mengele's skull. In an attempt to trace Nazi criminals in the 1980s, an interdisciplinary team of experts examined a skull that was presumed to be that of the deceased Mengele. Keenan and Weizman not only trace the team's collaboration in their attempt to find out the truth, but they further point to this case as the birth of modern forensics.

in the ways that subjects come to know and act on the relations in the world, perception represents the subject's access to reality, its unmediated, embodied way of encountering the world. As Gumbrecht notes "[l]ived experience or *Erleben* presupposes that purely physical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) has already taken place, on the one hand, and that it will be followed by experience (*Erfahrung*) as the result of acts of world interpretation, on the other" (Gumbrecht 100, original emphasis). Reconciling perception and experience and exploring this connection mark central concerns of investigative aesthetics as well as of aesthetic education.

Basing investigative aesthetics on *aisthesis* and relating it to its roots in forensics, Fuller and Weizman argue that the methodology is therefore not concerned with questions of beautification but with the "careful attunement and noticing extending to the elaboration of precise means of sensing and sense making [sic]" (12), of registering instances of sensual, embodied perception that intervene with the usual, everyday experience of the world. Importantly, turning towards aesthetic experiences and paying close attention to perception can be very effectful as aesthetic experiences hold a destabilizing potential. As Michael Staudigl writes, taking such a phenomenological perspective bears the potential to "articulate the as yet mute experience . . . without all too soon incorporating it into preconceived conceptions, definitions, or essential determinations" (9, my translation). This disruptive and knowledge-destabilizing potential is also fundamental to Fuller and Weizman's concept of investigative aesthetics which "uses technology but interrogates the politics of the very technology it uses; it uses multiple platforms to represent things publicly, but queries the limits and politics of these fora of representation; it involves knowledge production while keeping a critical eye on the power-knowledge nexus" (17).

Investigative aesthetics considers media products as textures that produce information. Fuller and Weizman acknowledge that the way one uses these products affects the access, understanding, and interpretations that are produced. Emphasizing the situatedness of experience and perception, they continue to argue that digital technologies offer opportunities to modify the products so that these speak differently or more clearly to sensibilities of noticing. This "involves tuning into and interpreting weak signals and noticing unintentional evidence registered in visual, audio, or data files or in the material composition of our environment" (13). Investigative aesthetics thus describes process-oriented practices that pay attention to the "multiplicity of situated perspectives" (6).

In practice, the Forensic Architecture Network – a transnational collective of interdisciplinary scholars working on projects based on investigative aesthetics – reviews concrete sites of human rights violations. Recent investigations include reconstructions of historical events, such as the German colonial genocide in Namibia, but also cases concerned with ecological disasters, such as the 2023 chemical fire at the

Marathon Refinery in Garyville, Louisiana, and the Beirut port explosion in 2020, as well as analyses of recent war incidents, such as Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack. One of the latest investigations in the United States deals with the murder of June Knightly by a right-wing activist at a Black Lives Matter protest in Portland, Oregon, in 2022. While the gunman was charged with the murder and sentenced to life in prison in 2023, what sparked additional interest of the researchers were conflicting claims made by the police and witnesses. Police falsely claimed in public statements that "June died during a 'confrontation' between 'armed protesters' and 'an armed homeowner'" (Trafford et al.). In doing so, the police falsely held the protesters to be partially at fault. The research network's analysis of video evidence clearly revealed an unprovoked attack on unarmed protestors. This evidence was also examined by the police, which resulted in the release of an armed guard who, after shots were fired, rushed to the scene and stopped the attacker by wounding him. However, the police did not correct the initial, false version, which would publicly bring justice to the victims, for three years (Trafford et al.).[5] This and many more case studies are openly accessible online. On the Forensic Architecture Network's website, the network not only publishes the results in the form of a written report and a video, but they also comprehensively trace their analytic methods. In the case of the murder of June Knightly, Robert Trafford et al. used a combination of 3D modelling, fieldwork, and situated testimony.

The cases presented on the Forensic Architecture website reveal that investigative aesthetics employs a multiplicity of methods, skills, and literacies, always depending on the case at hand. The methodology is inherently interdisciplinary and can only work by relying on a network of experts. Hence, it encounters the object of study inherently critically, contesting dominant narratives and expanding considerably the analytical perspective by tuning in, amplifying, and multiplying the sentient surfaces of the object of study (Weizman and Lund 232) so that shifted sensibilities might grant new knowledge. In doing so, this approach resonates with basic ideas that American studies scholars also bring to their classrooms: approaching texts and cultural products critically, being open to listening to the intricacies of the material, engaging with the object of study democratically, interdisciplinarily, and decolonially. Even though there can be barriers hindering implementations in some areas, investigative aesthetics as a form of aesthetic education can enrich and energize our classrooms on multiple levels.

[5] A *Guardian* article argues that this late apology and correction was the result of increased public attention after the publication of the Forensic Architecture Network's investigation (Mackey). As their results were not only published on their website but also by *The Guardian*, presented in an exhibition in Portland from February to May 2024, and discussed in multiple public lectures, one can indeed assume that the public attention pressured the police to publish their statement on YouTube on January 29, 2025.

Aesthetic Education in the American Studies Classroom

Based on an approach that relates aesthetics to the theory of the sensual, embodied perception of the world, aesthetic education elementally indexes, according to Fretwell, "learning to perceive" or more advanced "learning to differentiate 'details in the qualities of things' through the micro-operations of perception" (144). As Fretwell outlines, the genealogy of aesthetic education as a form of literacy training is closely tied to humanist philosophy and to romanticist endeavors of cultivating self-possessive personhood through a sensationalist epistemology (145). However, a turn to aesthetics does not need to be grounded in humanism but it also allows to exceed the realms of clearly delineated and hegemonic "-isms."

Aesthetic education enables the learner to viscerally experience the material, and it therefore allows for stepping back from established, dominant power dynamics. Also emphasizing the significance of aesthetics, Kandice Chuh introduces the concept of illiberal humanisms, which refers to "subjugated or disavowed humanisms" (xi) that have been outcast from "bourgeois liberalism and its cognate epistemologies" (xi). Illiberal humanisms, she argues in *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, originate from a centrality of aesthetics which here – in contrast to the common use of the aesthetic in liberal humanism as a classifying, hierarchizing category – "refers to the relationships among the senses and the processes and structures of value making by which certain sensibilities become common sense and others are disavowed, subjugated, or otherwise obscured" (xii). Chuh advocates for

> bring[ing] forward an understanding of human beingness to be defined not by discrete and self-possessed individuality but instead by constitutive relationality; they [illiberal humanisms] are the displacement of the primacy of the visual characterizing the epistemologies of bourgeois liberal modernity by the generation of rationalities that make sense through visceral multisensory experiences of the world; they afford the emergence of a critical taxonomy that features encounter without conquest and entanglement in lieu of terms and concepts inhering in knowledge paradigms that hold the political and cultural, and economic and artistic as discretely bounded realms; and they facilitate the articulation and elaboration of epistemes thoroughly incommensurate with the developmental geographies and temporalities of bourgeois liberal humanism. (xi)

Aesthetic education bears an important political dimension through which the "reality-formation routines of hierarchical power can also be broken" (Fuller and Weizman 202).[6] Simultaneously, it also holds the potential of community building, of the

[6] Supposedly contrasting, Gumbrecht argues that "the combination of aesthetics with ethics, that is, the projection of ethical norms on to the potential objects of aesthetic experience, will inevitably lead to the erosion of the potential intensity of the latter. In other words, to adapt aesthetic intensity to ethical requirements means to normalize and ultimately dilute it" (102–03). Still, it is crucial to note that Gumbrecht writes about the aesthetic experience of artworks – or rather of objects that are not part of our usual everyday experience – and, in saying so, turns towards a potential inclination to politicize art. Investigative aesthetics, on the other hand, advocates for amplifying the sentient surfaces of objects in order to allow investigators to perceive it differently or more holistically. This change in perception can change how we process and ultimately interpret the object of study.

formation of a commons, as Fuller and Weizman emphasize. They argue that "commons are produced through communication between a collectivity that emerges around the problem and the activity of making sense of the world" (204). Around aesthetic experiences, they continue, commons can form: "Creating such an epistemic community means recognising and bringing together, debating, a plurality of experiences and means of sense-making" (209). Investigative aesthetics thus marks a practice that can fulfill multiple functions, all of which are also crucial in citizenship education: collaboration, democratic processes of community building through the formation of knowledge, cultivating individual agency as well as key competences needed in the process of knowledge formation, critical openness to knowledge acquisition, and the disruption of established knowledge and power dynamics.

Proceeding from these general, preliminary considerations, it is pivotal to consider the specific potentials and challenges of implementing investigative aesthetics in the American studies classroom. First, aesthetic education in general can help learners to (re)connect with the material or phenomena Americanists analyze. Allowing learners to *sense* the material outside of, at times, rigid frames of interpretation and symptomatic readings creates an individual, embodied relation to the material. As Gumbrecht notes, instead of reducing complexity to make topics digestible, aesthetic experience draws the "students' attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them" (128). This open encounter with the material might spark interest, train concentration, further the exploration of the layers of the material, and can grant a more sustainable learning success. This aspect certainly also includes what Jay Mechling calls a "reference to play." In his discussion of an operational definition of an "American Studies Thinker," he outlines this figure's comfort in "playing with ideas and perspectives," an ability and aspiration that allow for an open, unbiased engagement with the object of study. Moreover, this notion of openness to play not only relates to the side of the learner, but it also includes the instructor and points to an important aspect of the teacher's self-understanding encapsulated in the supposed paradox surrounding how many teacher-scholars encounter "problems" that Randy Bass outlines:

> One telling measure of how differently teaching is regarded from traditional scholarship or research within the academy is what a difference it makes to have a "problem" in one versus the other. In scholarship and research, having a "problem" is at the heart of the investigative process. . . . But in one's teaching, a "problem" is something you don't want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it. . . . Changing the status of the *problem* in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about. (original emphasis)

Offering a problem-centered, process-oriented, and open approach to the material thus also requires teachers to allow for open and unbiased findings and requires them

to leave potentially comfortable tracks concerning the objects of study, methods, theories, and interpretations. At the same time, this encourages teaching to be viewed as a scholarly activity in which the teacher is not necessarily an expert on the issue and classrooms are understood as spaces that foster critical reflection, dialogue, and renegotiation of scholarly research and objectives as well as a reflection of the role of pedagogy. As Oppermann elaborates, this includes a systematic reflection of all aspects that impact one's teaching – thus also structural, inter-personal, social, and environmental aspects that at times exceed the immediate classroom but still impact learning – and a commitment to consider these aspects as part of the scholarly practices of knowledge generation in American studies (327–28). This allows one to critically question established or routine classroom practices and to continuously (re)establish "what it means to do American Studies" (332).

A second potential of a turn towards aesthetics lies in the attention on questions of *how* texts and media products produce knowledge and how they are embedded in power-knowledge nexuses, leading to a critical, decolonial use and negotiation of these objects. In a time of "alternative facts," fake news, deep fakes, AI chatbots, and LLM-based apps such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and Perplexity, it is pivotal to include critical media studies also in American studies classrooms in order to enable students to handle media products such as texts, images, and videos responsibly and critically. Aesthetic education is an important tool in preparing learners to meet the challenges of our time and of the future. While this includes the sub-competences of media literacy that represent a reflexive, critical awareness of the "dual function of media as a means of manipulation and self-empowerment" and thus as a "social sphere of action" (Volkmann 153–54, my translation), investigative aesthetics also ideally helps to develop practical skills that involve digital competence, like the "ability to use, access, filter, evaluate, create, program and share digital content" as laid out by the European Commission (10).

Therefore, third, the implementation of investigative aesthetics attends to and trains multiple, contextually contingent types of literacies. The method's multimodality can hold the potential to speak to the learners' skills that might usually not be addressed in a regular American studies class. Depending on the group of learners, some students might be able to work with digital technologies, to modify media products, as well as to tune into and amplify signals. Even if this is not the case, investigative aesthetics can further the collaboration and cooperation of different disciplines, bringing together classes in American studies and informatics, for example. Such a collaborative project certainly bears the potential of both sides benefitting from each other's skill set and insights, and the use of learning methods such as group and project work has proven to be generally beneficial to the learning success. Moreover, the interdisciplinarity and the training of multiple literacies, among them

digital, media, and data literacy, can pave the way towards the realization of digital American studies classrooms.

While there are thus many reasons that might call for an integration of aesthetic education generally and investigative aesthetics more specifically, there are also recognizable difficulties. The multiplicity of literacies ideally requires the teacher to be well-trained in various literacies and in different subject areas, or to be at least able to guide an advanced and literacy-diverse classroom in a process-oriented, open exploration. Collaborations with other disciplines, on the other hand, require significant preparation and investment of time and resources of all participants. However, even if the collaborations themselves are not time-consuming, there are always challenges in working with digital archives as these need to be explored rather extensively beforehand. While the digitization of cultural materials[7] has opened up new research possibilities in the past years, there is also, as Ingrid Gessner and Marc Priewe stress, "the danger of dilettante scholarship that is lurking in digitized and secondary material" (47). As Werner Sollors notes, there are (supposedly) many "shortcuts to research results" in the digital realm (15). While these "shortcuts"[8] have facilitated in the past decades how we do research, they also determine the type of research conducted and the methods used. Not only do we have to bear in mind potential biases, limitations, and manipulations of the archives' creators and "acknowledge that the choice of what is digitized influences research, often forcing researchers to resort to materials that are comparatively easier to access and use" (Gessner and Priewe 47), but we also need to remember the necessity of confronting learners with "the actual materiality of our objects of study (and the experience of them)" (47). Thus, while the digital realm certainly grants access to a myriad of archives, it can neither represent the entire picture nor a holistic, embodied experience. Taking these considerations into account is also crucial in preparing a project based on investigative aesthetics. It is clear, however, that oftentimes rigid, discipline-centered, and time-pressed institutional conditions further affect such endeavors negatively. Preparing for a class that works with investigative aesthetics requires extensive, time-consuming preparation. In an academic system that rewards scholarly publications more than teaching (such as in Germany or Austria), many teachers – especially those depending on short- or fixed-term contracts while also pursuing a professional qualification or those in positions with a heavy teaching load – might simply lack the personal resources or, understandably, prioritize other commitments over experimental teaching methods.

[7] Gessner and Priewe note the importance of acknowledging that much of this work has been conducted invisibly, oftentimes unacknowledged and even uncompensated. While we can profit from the work of these "unsung hero archivists," their operating oftentimes outside of long-term financial and institutional support can have a detrimental effect on the preparation of digital objects (46).

[8] While one is quick to think of "shortcuts" such as generative AI here, Sollors, writing in 2019, also includes tools that we nowadays would consider indispensable for our research, such as digitized libraries, text and image searches, and word processing software (15–16).

Another difficulty pertains to general potential limitations in availability of material and digital infrastructure. Hence, it might at times be difficult to access material that would further the investigations of a course project due to financial or logistical reasons or to get access to hard- and software needed to engage with certain media products. In their "Notes on the State of Digital American Studies Scholarship, Publishing and Teaching," Gessner and Priewe also emphasize that the digital infrastructure at German universities cannot compare with US-American universities and colleges, even small ones. This, of course, has had an important impact not only on scholarship in the digital humanities but also on implementing technology-based teaching methods in American studies classrooms in Germany (45–46). Overcoming this gap, they argue, not only requires individual willingness but also institutional commitment to invest money, time, and energy to build this infrastructure and train scholars (46).

Despite these limitations, I want to advocate for the benefits of aesthetic education in the American studies classroom. The following case study offers an example that could be adapted for classroom use since the analysis of the short film functions as a form of sensitivity training without relying heavily on technology. While it does not capture the full depth of first-hand experimentation and exploration that are characteristic of more advanced investigative aesthetics projects, it nonetheless shows that some of the approach's benefits can still be realized.

Case Study: Alejandro González Iñárritu's Short Film in *11'09"1: September 11*

Even twenty-five years after the deadliest terrorist attacks in human history, which caused the deaths of nearly three thousand people and injured tens of thousands, many people are still struggling to comprehend the devastation. The images of planes striking the Twin Towers and the subsequent devastation have become some of the most widely circulated images of the twenty-first century. Rewatching the live media coverage is still considered haunting by many, even though, as Rob Kroes notes, "there are those who doubt whether any single image is able to stand out from the others through its power to capture the essence of what happened" (1). This perception of the inadequacy of media products also reflects in many critics' observations that 9/11 changed our understanding of reality altogether, as Silvia Schultermandl notes (183). Similarly, in the press sheet for *11'09"1: September 11*, Iñárritu reflects on his first impression on September 11, 2001, when he also thought that "fiction was killed by reality" (qtd. in Kirsner and Herrmann 266, my translation). Merely rewatching the footage and the media coverage, one not only realizes the cinematic quality already attested on that day (Scheffer) but it also becomes clear that the photographic record has shaped the perspective on 9/11 decisively. Susan Lurie comments on the

selection of published images and the associated censorship of horrific visuals of death and dying people in the media in the weeks after 9/11. Following Susan Sontag and Barbie Zelizer, she observes that this was not only due to paying respect to the victims but also reflected "a nostalgia for a spectatorship made safe" (Lurie 47). As Sontag argues, such a spectatorship was set out to uphold the "patriotic faith" (47) that these atrocities take place elsewhere, i.e., in places of the third world but not on US-American soil (70–71). Many photographs and videos published after 9/11 have crafted a careful image of heroes and victims, sanitizing the sheer horror of it, thus contributing to the conception of what Gross and Snyder-Körber call a "standardized, tendentious visual narrative" (369). Therefore, Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer explain, in the classroom, "9/11 functions as an object of learning but is already present as a subjective memory or individual awareness, and as a field of cultural knowledge in the minds of both the learners and the teachers" (8).

Given the representative inadequacy of individual media products, such as images, texts, films, and poems, as well as the privileging and repression of the widely circulated visual imagery, teaching 9/11 requires the inclusion of diverse perspectives. As a well-documented, mediated, and aestheticized event that has been the subject of a great number of oftentimes accessible media products, doing so is not only very feasible but the topic also lends itself, as Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer argue, to integrating training in key competences as well as working with methods of aesthetic education such as investigative aesthetics.

Because of the complexity of the event, the number and variation of available texts, as well as of the ensuing questions regarding forms of representation, there are a great number of possible approaches to teaching and learning 9/11. I agree with the editors of *Learning 9/11*, who argue that the topic is particularly suited to implementing methods of problem-based learning that engage with the "procedural nature of cultural meaning-making and encourage inquiry into the processes and strategies of reality-formation" (Bauder-Begerow and Schäfer 8). Bringing together aesthetic education and the negotiation of 9/11, exploring the innumerable videos, reports, poems, blog entries, etc. that were early and oftentimes immediate responses to the attacks and that can still be found online, would work not only for a potential class project through which learners could explore the understanding and narrativization of that day, but they could simultaneously improve their media, data, and digital literacy in researching representations of this momentous event in recent US-American history. As outlined in the previous chapter, however, this can also entail several challenges, some of which can be worked around as I will show in the following case study. Iñárritu's short film in *11'09''1: September 11* exemplifies the effects of shifting the sensibilities and of playing with different modes of perception that I have described as a key concern of investigative aesthetics. In doing so, it, in line with Weizmann and

Fuller, "develop[s] both a focus on the political dimensions of sensation and feeling as they are crystallised in specific incidents, and also the experimental multiplication of what counts as sensors and sensing" (201).

11'09''1: September 11 is a joint, international film project by eleven filmmakers – Samira Makhmalbaf (Iran), Claude Lelouch (France), Youssef Chahine (Egypt), Danis Tanović (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Idrissa Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso), Ken Loach (Great Britain), Alejandro González Iñárritu (Mexico), Amos Gitaï (Israel), Mira Nair (India), Sean Penn (United States), and Shōhei Imamura (Japan) – that is composed of eleven short films, each eleven minutes, nine seconds, and one frame in length. Initiated by the French film producer Alain Brigand shortly after the terrorist attacks, it, according to Birgit Däwes, gave all directors the opportunity to respond to 9/11 in individual short films "that would reflect each director's reaction from his/her own national, cultural, and historical perspective, including their own memory and language" (295), thus also neither asking them to create a coherent story nor to fit their perspective into dominant (visual) narratives surrounding 9/11. As Däwes acknowledges, *11'09''1: September 11* therefore takes a transnational perspective (299). This "[t]ransnationalism involves a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe" (Duncan and Juncker 8).

Still, however, the film has also received criticism for its deterritorialization and recontextualization of 9/11. Andreas Jahn-Sudmann criticizes Brigand's approach and his demand towards the directors to reflect on their own cultural background in their shorts and notes that this already restricts the creative and narrative possibilities: "Brigand's demand . . . to establish a connection to one's own culture through the film is so invasive that certain forms of cultural reflection and narration are excluded in the first place" (128, my translation). Moreover, public criticism of the film around the time of its publication was much harsher. Published in 2002, when the dominant US-American discourse around 9/11 still highlighted the aspects of trauma and heroism, many of the short films take a rather critical transnational position towards the aftermath of 9/11 and the US-American exertion of influence globally. Mira Nair's film, for example, shifts the attention to the increased and continuous discrimination against Arab, Muslim, and perceived Muslim communities in the United States. Ken Loach's film, on the other hand, questions the extent of US-American influence in global politics by paralleling the terrorist attacks with another historical event of that day in 1973, namely the coup against the socialist Chilean government. Unsurprisingly, the critical, controversial, and at times almost polemic perspectives that the shorts draw were criticized as anti-American (Tambunan 227).

Iñárritu's short film also shifts the perspective on 9/11. It does, however, not so much achieve that by telling a specific (counter-)narrative but by playing with the

audience's perception of the event, or, as Schultermandl notes, by triggering the viewers' perspectival adjustments (186). Iñárritu himself explains that his mise en scène aims to establish eleven minutes of "visual silence": "I chose to confront people with their own images, their own fears and feelings about what had happened, allowing them to experience catharsis" (qtd. in Clemente). Thus, the film recasts *how* the event is experienced through visual media and might ultimately ethically challenge the audience, as Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan also argues (228).

Characterized by its collage-like documentary style, Iñárritu's contribution, Däwes claims, "defamiliariz[es] . . . well-known images . . . [and] disrupts the numbing effect that these images have achieved through endless repetitions, forcing audiences into a fresh perspective on apparently well-digested events" (297). The short opens with a black screen and silence. The silence is broken by a crescendo of many people speaking frantically. While many, if not most, viewers might not recognize the language spoken, Alison Young identifies it as "voices belonging to the Chamulas Indians of Chiapas Mexico, . . . chanting a prayer for the dead" (41). Added to this almost dizzying soundscape is the ticking of a metronome which further adds to the haunting atmosphere created by the swelling sounds and the black screen. Only after two minutes, the visual silence is broken for the split of a second when the viewer is confronted with the image of a person falling from the Twin Towers. This scene coincides with the ticking of the metronome emphasizing its effect. Yet, as it is shown for merely a split second, the viewer is barely allowed to think about this confrontation but is left startled and again confronted with a black screen. Continuously, the soundscape transforms, and the chants are mixed with original recordings of the planes flying and crashing, live reporting of that day (in multiple languages), sirens, the sound of human beings hitting the ground, and victims' last messages on answering machines. The visual silence is repeatedly broken by footage of falling people,[9] and these flashes not only happen in shorter intervals, but they also grow longer. At one point (01:12:30), the audio of the reporting seems to align with the footage of reporters responding to the sight of people falling from the towers. After that, different soundtracks overlap again until the visual silence is complemented by audio silence (01:15:22). While the audio silence continues, we see flashes of the towers collapsing, followed by a crescendo of chants and classical (film) music. Until the end, there is a black screen and the music that counters the fairly haunting atmosphere the film established up until this point. It rather creates a hopeful soundscape that is complemented by the gradual transition of the black into a white screen. As the screen brightens, the viewers see a sentence in Arabic that is accompanied by its English translation

[9] While I write of falling and not jumping people here, I do not use that vocabulary as an assessment. Certainly, people made the decision to jump from the towers, and these actions have afterwards been interpreted as brave acts of free will. Still, I neither can nor want to evaluate the victim's motivations in such a horrific situation and will therefore use "falling people" without intending to comment on agency.

after some seconds: "Does God's light guide us or blind us?" (01:17:47). Eventually, the sentences are dissolved in light as the voices of the prayer chants grow louder again.

The film plays with the experience of absence, foregrounding sound, and just sparsely confronting the audience with images of falling people and the towers collapsing. In doing so, it shifts between sound, visual footage, and absence. By only occasionally showing visual footage, the film creates a feasible tension as the audience does not know what to expect, when visuals will appear and what they will represent. What is shown is also telling. While the live coverage of people falling from the towers as well as Richard Drew's famous photograph *Falling Man*, published in several newspapers including *The New York Times* on September 12, 2001, were certainly perceived as haunting by the audience on 9/11 as well as in the immediate aftermath, imagery of falling people was quickly censored. Excluded from further dissemination (Kroes 5), the images were, however, never erased from public memory (8). Simultaneously read as a representation of the sheer horror of that day as well as an emblem of national pride, of, as Jared Gee argues, "the profundity of a man choosing to use his power, his American freedom, taking rebellious yet patriotic command of the terrible situation" (448), the photograph of the falling man allows for multiple interpretations, "hold[ing] national and even religious symbolism" (449). Gee outlines that Drew's title *Falling Man* is not only a reference to Adam's biblical fall but it also "refer[s] back to the theological origins of US politics that structure[] the US and Europe," situating it within a series of religious discourses that justify retribution (451). He continues to note, however, that Iñárritu's use of the footage of falling people counters these dominant US-American interpretations as the film "resists the media spectacle of 9/11 and narratives of security, refusing nationalist symbolism, censorship, and discourses for intervention" (449).

11'09''1: September 11 lends itself to being incorporated in an undergraduate as well as a graduate seminar on discourse, representations, and the aftermath of 9/11 within the field of American literary and cultural studies, but it can also fit seminars that cover broader scopes and topics (such as a topical class on US imperialism, a more theory-oriented class on the construction of counter-discourses in US-American culture, or a seminar in film studies). Within these courses, engaging with the film can offer several different advantages and lead to different learning outcomes which are dependent on the respective seminars, the overall course content and structure, and the intended learning objectives.

In one scenario, the short film could be used to introduce the representation and discourses surrounding 9/11. In this way, the film functions as a first access to 9/11 for students who are now usually too young to draw on a first-hand memory of the day and who, at least in the European classroom, oftentimes do not possess much

information about the historical event and the cultural memory of 9/11. By watching the short film, they are invited to *perceive* and *experience* the event viscerally before diving deeper into the more guided or narrative forms of representation they will likely encounter in the course of the seminar. Such an inductive approach as well as the openness and collage-like style of the short film support learners in individually reflecting on their aesthetic experience and experimenting freely with associations. Simultaneously, the almost enigmatic nature of the film, which, in part, results from its play with presence and absence, its creation of an unconventional, transnational soundscape, and its use of the bilingual quotation at the end, invites collaborative forms of learning (such as pair/group work or class discussions) while simultaneously appreciating initial personal responses. As the short film does not lend itself to ready-at-hand interpretations, learners will have to find ways to discuss and negotiate their affective experiences in order to make sense of the film.

In another scenario, the film could be introduced once students have already acquired some knowledge about 9/11, its aftermath, and associated dominant discourses. In this scenario, the film might enable the students to critically question and expand the knowledge that they have already acquired. Here, it can also be a useful tool for questioning and reconfiguring the dynamics and effects of different forms of representation of the event. This potential also results from contextualizing the photograph/video of the falling person and analyzing it in relation to its medium of publication. As noted above, photographs/videos of falling people circulate within ethical tensions that emerge from the aestheticization of about-to-be-dead bodies and the political use of their images (see also de Vries 119). Photographs of falling people, such as Drew's, have been used to give a poetic and heroic spin to the sheer horror of their dying. Leon Wieseltier, for example, describes the man depicted in Drew's *Falling Man* as follows:

> His physical integrity is extraordinary. He is standing in the world but the world is upside-down. He does not appear to be wounded. He seems composed, a stoic in the air, except for the tails of his white shirt, which hang from his trousers like snapped wings. His hands are smartly at his side, his legs look as if they are marching. It is almost possible to make out his face. It is an African American face, a full, tender face. I do not see panic on the man's countenance. I see thought. . . . I suspect that his eyes are open. His direction is clear.

His poetic thoughts on the photograph turn the falling man into an almost mythical creature. The horror of his dying does not corrupt his composure. Even in his dying moments, he represents the US-American virtues of determination and bravery. Moreover, falling people seem to be frozen in time as the actual moment of death is not captured. As Barbie Zelizer notices, such a depiction suggests "the remote possibility that . . . it was 'all just a bad dream'" (qtd. in de Vries 120). Wieseltier's is just one exemplary response that indicates how pictures of falling people are repurposed,

partly to cloud the horror of the event but also to provide different ways of deriving meaning from it. In this regard, Nadia de Vries points to the relation between the digital image and the corporeality of the deceased. She argues that the uses of images of falling persons do not necessarily result in a detachment from corporeal reality but rather in an abjection: "If the corporeal reality is abjected from the image in the way that Kristeva describes, the image that arises from this abjection is imbued with a new significance. Perhaps this abjection is not necessarily a dehumanization of the depicted body in question, but rather, an affective *repurposing* of that same body" (121, original emphasis). By reframing the footage of falling people, staging them within a set of visual silence and a peculiar, transforming soundscape, Iñárritu's short film affects the audience. This can in a next step also initiate discussions of (ethical) questions that result from the tense relation between (corpo-)reality and representation/symbolization. In this way, students in the American studies classroom can not only critically explore the effects of media and their relation to reality, but they can also engage in complex discussions of the ethics of representation and potentially question their own affective responses and ethical frameworks.

Conclusion

Even though Iñárritu's short film does not provide students with the opportunity to experiment first-hand with applying the methodology of investigative aesthetics, it represents an artistic expression of the basic notions encapsulated in this methodology wherein the formation of knowledges and aesthetics find new modes of coexistence. This is achieved by recombining different media and texts, and thereby, similarly to Fuller and Weizman's suggestions, "tuning into and interpreting weak signals and noticing unintentional evidence registered in visual, audio, or data files or in the material composition of our environment" (13). This can ultimately effect changes in the perception of these media by shifting and cultivating sensibilities. As Fuller and Weizman emphasize, investigative aesthetics aims at "challenge[ing] established formations of power over the always complicated questions of truth" (19). Likewise, the short film confronts transnational relations as well as national narratives.

Iñárritu's short film expands discussions in the American studies classroom on the representation of and knowledge formation surrounding 9/11. Engaging critically with Iñárritu's film can cultivate the ability to negotiate ethical positions through one's ability to sense. Moreover, it potentially allows for forming a collective by participating collectively in an aesthetic experience, comparable to Fuller and Weizman's idea of an investigative commons. Furthermore, the short film integrates 9/11 in transnational discussions, as does the complete film. Breaking with cinematic conventions and confronting and thereby initiating a reconsideration of the archive of 9/11, it also functions to cultivate media literacy. Even though merely working with

this film does not give the learners the chance to perform investigative aesthetics actively, it, contrary to comprehensive investigations, relies on very few prerequisites and can easily be integrated into any American studies classroom. Still, the sheer force of the film, its "confrontational" and unconventional nature, and its call to the senses represents an aesthetic experience that can yield critical investigations of this material.

While the film can represent a reasonable and effective compromise to achieve several objectives of investigative aesthetics, it only touches the actual potential that this methodology can have in the American studies classroom. Through its multimodality and its inherently interdisciplinary, decolonial, and democratic nature, it can facilitate the training of multiple key competences, including some that are oftentimes not at the center of education in American studies classrooms. Investigative aesthetics could not only energize our teaching, but it also implements the requirements set out by politics. At this point it only remains to hope that politics will also set up the structures that foster the implementation of creative, technology-based, and interdisciplinary methods.

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