

*The Shock of the News: Media Coverage  
and the Making of 9/11* Brian A. Monahan

New York and London: New York University Press, 2010.

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*Brute Reality: Power, Discourse and the  
Mediation of War* Stuart Price

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For those without a professional or private stake in the subject, the arrival of two new books about 9/11 might trigger weary exhaustion – a terror-fatigue brought on by almost a decade of fervent academic scrutiny that has yielded its fair share of overstatement and hyperbole. Thankfully, the publications in question are not ‘about’ 9/11 as such, at least not in any straightforward manner. For Brian A. Monahan, the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 constitute a convenient case study that exemplifies a more wide-reaching phenomenon in

the news media. Stuart Price, meanwhile, uses the event as a platform from which to subject his wide-ranging examples to diverse methodological inquiry, encompassing epistemology, semiotics, framing studies and linguistics.

Monahan's *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* is the more straightforward and focussed, stemming from a clear central argument: American mainstream news is increasingly fashioned into 'long-running 'serialised dramas' that bear greater resemblance to popular fiction than to journalism' (p. xi – xii). While the coverage of 9/11 is argued to be indicative of this tendency, Monahan does not position it as unique; in fact, for the first fifty pages the attacks barely feature in his analysis, with examples predominantly drawn from elsewhere. There is perhaps an issue of cultural specificity with some of these alternative examples, as his suggestion that 'at the mention of only a single name, most readers will readily recall these tales' (p. xii) seems firmly directed at US readers: while O.J. Simpson, Elian Gonzales and Hurricane Katrina will all likely register in the minds of UK readers, I confess prior unfamiliarity with the names Andrea Yates, Natalee Holloway, Laci Petersen and others, which online sources helped remedy. The need to consult secondary texts for such clarification is necessitated by a general lack of contextual summaries (or, in keeping with the book's suggestion that these 'public dramas' are narrated through the conventions of fiction rather than reportage, 'synopses'), but despite this there is plenty to recommend the study to UK readers. Such is the strength of Monahan's argument that domestic examples readily

suggest themselves, with the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, the Ipswich murders or the search for Raoul Moat all fitting the bill.

When Monahan does turn his attention to 9/11, limitations inevitably reveal themselves. His sources are restricted to a selection of NBC's news coverage in the week immediately following the attacks, and one year's worth of related New York Times articles. These texts constitute a relatively narrow focus, with no further mention of the 'new media' he identifies in the introduction; although Monahan recognises that the changing news-media landscape exists as much online as in print, he chooses to base his analysis firmly on print and broadcast. However, he is careful to justify this decision, alert to the fact that, when the media's framing of information is the focus of study, it's vitally important not to unthinkingly replicate the practice in its analysis. So NBC and The New York Times are chosen not only for unfortunate but unavoidable issues of practicality, but also because of their 'sizable share of the post-9/11 media audience' (p. 11).

Monahan concludes that 'the story of September 11 did not have to be told as it was' (p. 171), a familiar argument perhaps, but one that yields fresh insight in this context. His concept of the 'public drama' convincingly weds news discourse with entertainment, the 'ripped from the headlines' plots of certain film and television texts reflected back by the 'ripped from television' structures of the news media itself. With an ongoing public drama unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico, updates on which continue to

occupy daily news reports, it's a timely supposition that is difficult to dispute.

In Brute Reality: Power Discourse and the Mediation of War, Stuart Price has a more ambitious aim, analysing the 'formal attempts, made by prominent social actors, to present a rationale for the existence and exercise of coercive power' (p. 11). The focus is not the War on Terror's constituent events, but rather the 'various explanations that have been offered for its commission' (p. 11). Price's study is immediately valuable for its up-to-date inclusion of the early post-Bush years; while War on Terror literature is plentiful, Price locates additional context that earlier studies of this nature could only guess at. Barack Obama is installed alongside expected *dramatis personae* like Dick Cheney, Osama Bin Laden and Tony Blair, although this does result in the occasional over-eager and already-contradicted statement. For example, a reference to the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre already feels dated, the executive order having yet to translate into actual closure for various political reasons. Otherwise, the contemporariness is an asset: for example, an examination of Israel's violent 2009 incursion into Palestinian territory – an event which preceded Obama's inauguration yet prompted no comment from the President-elect – is one of Price's most original and instructive critical inclusions.

As the Israel example indicates, Price writes with a broader sense of global context, and any UK readers similarly in the dark about Monahan's examples will likely welcome the familiarity of names like Milliband and Prescott, Channel 4 and The Daily

Express. Throughout, subjects are approached from unexpected angles and corralled into thematic chapters to produce illuminating comparisons. For example, a chapter on ‘Surveillance, Authority and Linguistic Categories’ begins by discussing the shooting of Charles de Menezes from a semiotic perspective (questioning the category ‘terrorist’), proceeds to consider surveillance as a culture or attitude rather than an act, then concludes with a semantic analysis of formal and informal speech (using the accidental recording of a conversation between Tony Blair and George Bush at the St Petersburg G8 summit by way of example). Refreshingly, Michel Foucault makes only a fleeting appearance, and the result is dense but incisive.

Where Monahan’s clarity and precision resulted in an easily-digestible study suitable for all academic interest, Price’s style – in fact, his entire *modus operandi* – is more intricately complex. Both have their clear benefits, but it is Brute Reality that is already dog-eared from frequent revisits and consultations.

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