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## September 11's Cultural Impact

An expert from the Smithsonian Institution explains that entertainment will one day reflect the day-to-day stresses of post-9-11 society—just not right away

**By B. J. Sigesmund**  
 NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Sept. 5 — Mainstream entertainment has long served as a mirror for American culture. Whether it's a moon landing or a crashing stock market, a presidential assassination or AIDS, the country's arts community has taken landmark events and trends and reflected them back at us—in large and small ways—in movies, TV, books, theater and music.

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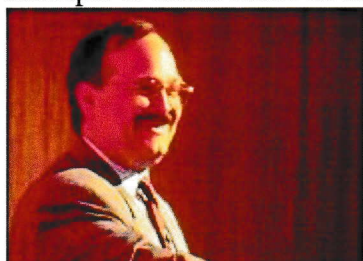
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HAS THAT HAPPENED yet with the events of September 11, 2001? No one can deny that America's world view was altered forever on that bleak day. But so far, the entertainment world has mostly confined itself to revisiting the day's events. CBS's "9/11" and HBO's "In Memoriam" were just two of the many documentaries that recaptured the horror of those 24 hours. Bruce Springsteen's album "The Rising" was inspired by the event's heroes. We've already seen an estimated 150 books related to the attacks—from picture books to poetry. And an off-off-Broadway show called "The Guys" told the story of a fire captain who lost several colleagues that Tuesday morning.

But that doesn't tell it all. We've yet to see an influx of new artistic works reflecting the day-to-day stresses that became apparent in the days and weeks after the event. The economic aftershocks; depression and anxiety-fueled sleep deprivation; fears of germ warfare and dirty bombs and the underlying threat that terrorists could strike again, today or anytime in the future—with even deadlier results. "We don't have the distance yet, and we might not have it for five or six years," says Dwight Blocker Bowers, a cultural historian at the Smithsonian in Washington. "We're still trying to come to terms with the evidence. The documentaries, the picture books—these are first attempts to make sense of the horror."

'Removing the towers from movies was an indication that we could not accept an immediate past,' says Bowers. 'But I'm not quite sure that was true.'



Bowers oversees the museum's collections on American popular song and specializes in 20th century theater, dance, film and musicals. He spoke with



NEWSWEEK's B. J.

Sigismund about the entertainment community's response to 9-11 thus far, what he's learned from studying some of history's watershed moments—and what he expects from the future. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK: Can you compare this to President Kennedy's assassination, which was a big part of your childhood?**

**Dwight Blocker Bowers:** Back then, we were—for the first time in history—immediate witnesses to the event. It was the first instance of using the media to get at what was really a national crisis and a state of international mourning. We never thought that the machine that brought us "Howdy Doody" could also make us such a big part of history. I look back at the immediate reactions that existed at that time: the news coverage, photographic evidence of his regime in the White House, what happened in Dallas and the funeral afterward. That was reporting—and that's what we're still doing now.

**Let's got back a little further in time, to the response to the attack on Pearl Harbor.**

There was a more innocent and less complex response back then, and a much more immediate response. Our reaction then was emotional; the reaction now is layered with complexity. During World War II, there was a strong sense of unity in a mainstream emotional reaction. We were involved in this war, we were going to win it and people were going to come back. You know, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" was released in 1942. I don't think we have that innocence now. We're not feeling a single emotion. It isn't a single reaction.

**How would further terrorism affect our culture in the future?**

It will always have impact. Probably it will bring on—on one level—a degree of unity. It will also increase, I fear, anxiety and tension and will alter the way we live our lives. But of course, that's only from my point of view. One doesn't know about the nation at large. Time has told us that the concept of protecting and staying close and keeping in touch will bring us closer together—if only for transitory moments. The power of the shared experience means more, whether it's a community gathering or attending a theater performance or going to a movie. The idea of community now means a great deal more.

**Can you cite some examples from over the last 12 months?**

I keep thinking of the last performances of "The Fantasticks" [the long-running New York musical that closed on Jan. 13, 2002], in which the first line is, "Try to remember the kind of September when life was slow and oh so mellow." For the first couple months, people were reported sobbing in the audience. There was a shared sense of loss.



**After 9-11, the country embraced the anthem "God Bless America." What did you make of that?**

A song that we might have dismissed as mawkish and of another era seems to have a power for a wide audience today. It's not subtle, but it seems to have an emotional wallop. It was written for an Irving Berlin military revue for Broadway, featuring an all-soldier cast. Even in 1918 he thought it was too emotional to end the show.

**Emotions in America seemed to be all over the place in the immediate days after 9-11. People wondered if we'd ever laugh again. The editor of Vanity Fair thought it might be the end of irony. And Hollywood tried to second-guess audiences, digitally removing the Twin Towers from upcoming movies such as "Spider-Man" and "Zoolander." How did you feel about that?**

Removing the towers from movies was an indication that we could not accept an immediate past. But I'm not quite sure that was true. That's a studio's vision, not America's. We were imminently capable of that. We deal with loss constantly. If they were protecting us from grief, it wasn't necessary. We're well aware of change. Granted, the World Trade Center had horrible things associated with it. But digitizing out the towers was more market-driven than anything else. It made those films dated in a way, to have those buildings in it, that's how they saw it. But that, to me, was altering a piece of work. It's like digitizing a brighter smile on the Mona Lisa.

**You've been surprised that we've barely seen any books on day-to-day life after 9-11.**

I will say that print media, in terms of newspapers, have done extraordinary work in giving perspective here. But the other media has been dismissive or reactionary or taking us to another time. Still, of all the media that can make an immediate impact, the

publication world has the easiest run of it. It's taking the manuscript, printing it and marketing it. It's not dealing with the complexities of getting a recording produced, or making a film, or dealing with the crisis of creating something for television, which as we all know is rarely insightful about much of anything.

**TV is in fact taking us back to the past this fall with more nostalgia shows. Two new series have adults returning to their '80s childhoods, and two others are set in the '60s.**

I do think anytime a crisis hits anyone, the tendency is to find comfort in a more genial environment—or what we perceive as a more genial environment. Also, look at what's the greatest hit on Broadway now—"Hairspray." My instinct is there will be an outbreak of things that look at World War II and how if we got through that, we can get through this. We've had nostalgia about ourselves almost throughout all of the 20th century. It's seemingly safe to reinterpret the past. But it's tough to interpret the immediate.



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