

Jean Baudrillard

L'Esprit du Terrorisme

We have had our share of world events from Diana's death to the World Cup, as well as violent and real events, from wars to genocide. We have not yet had any symbolic event of such magnitude that it is not only broadcast all over the world, but holds globalization itself in check—not one. Throughout the stagnation of the nineties, in the words of the Argentinean writer Macedonio Fernandez, events were on strike. Well, the strike is off. Events are back with such an ardor that we were even confronted with the World Trade Center attacks, by the absolute event, the “mother event,” the pure event that concentrates in itself all the events that never took place.

These attacks turn not only the whole play of history and power relations topsy-turvy, but also the conditions of their analysis. Here one must take one's time. As long as events were stagnating, we had to anticipate them and stay ahead of the game. But when they suddenly drive forward with such thrust, we must slow down, without letting ourselves be buried under the morass of speeches and the warmongering cloud, and keep intact the unforgettable fulguration of images.

The South Atlantic Quarterly 101:2, Spring 2002.
Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press.

All the speeches and commentaries about September 11 betray the gigantic abreaction to the event itself and people's fascination with it. The moral condemnations, the national antiterrorism sacred union, are on par with the prodigious jubilation created by the desire to see the destruction of this global superpower, or more precisely, to watch it somehow destroy itself, commit a beautiful suicide. For it is this superpower that, through its unbearable power, is the secret cause of all the violence percolating all over the world, and consequently of the terrorist imagination, which unbeknownst to us, inhabits our psyche.

That we may have dreamed of that event, that everybody without exception, dreamed of it because no one cannot dream of the destruction of a power that has become hegemonic to such a point, is unacceptable for Western moral consciousness. However, it is a fact that can be measured against the pathetic violence shown by all the speeches and discourses that want to erase the event.

We could even go so far as to say it is *they* who perpetrated the attack, but it was *we* who wished it. If one does not take into account this fact the event loses all its symbolic dimension and becomes a mere accident, a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasm of a few fanatics whom it suffices to suppress. But we know better: hence, the whole production of a delirious counterphobia to exorcize evil. Because evil is everywhere, like an obscure object of desire. Without this deep complicity, the event would not have created such a big stir and in their symbolic strategy, the terrorists knew without doubt that they could count on this inadmissible complicity of evil.

It goes far beyond the hatred that the disinherited and the exploited of the world feel for the global, hegemonic superpower—those who happened to fall on the wrong side of world order. This invidious desire also resides in the very hearts of those who share in the world order's benefits. The allergy to any definitive order, to any ultimate power is happily a universal reaction and the two World Trade Center towers were the perfect embodiment of this definitive order precisely in their twin nature.

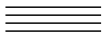
No need for a death drive, or a destruction drive, nor even perverse effects. It is that the logical and inexorable climb to power of power itself exacerbates the will to destroy this power; and power itself is accomplice with its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, one had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-jets with their own suicide. We heard, "Even God cannot declare war upon himself." Well, not

true! The West, assuming God's position (supine with divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy) has become suicidal and declared war upon itself.

The innumerable catastrophe films bear testimony to this phantasm. They conjure it up thanks to their power of images, while drowning it in special effects. But the universal attraction they exert, equal in that aspect to pornography, shows that the passage to the act is always close. The system shows more of its velleity toward self-destruction, the nearer it is to perfection or absolute power.

It is moreover very possible that the terrorists (no more than the experts) never forecast the Twin Towers collapse—that was, more than the strike on the Pentagon, the strongest symbolic shock. The symbolic collapse of a whole system happened through an invisible complicity, as if, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, the towers had played their part in the game, in order to crown the event.

In a way, it is the whole system that, through its internal fragility, gave assistance to the initial attack. The more the system concentrates itself globally, only constituting a single network, for instance, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point. Already, a single Philippino hacker, with his laptop, was able to launch the I Love You virus and wreak havoc in networks all around the world. Here we see nineteen kamikazes who, thanks to the absolute weapon of death, multiplied by technological efficiency, have set in motion a global catastrophic process.



When the situation is thus monopolized by the world superpower, when one is confronted by this formidable condensation of all the functions of the technocratic machinery allied to the reign of the *pensée unique*, which other choice is left but the terrorist transference of the situation?¹ It is the system itself that has created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation (*rétorsion*). By keeping for itself all the cards, it has forced the Other to change the rules of the game. And these new rules are more ferocious, because what is at stake is ferocious. To a system to whom the very excess of power poses an insoluble defiance, the terrorists answer through a definitive act whose exchange reaches the same impossibility. Terrorism is the act that makes restitution for an irreducible singularity at the heart of a generalized system of exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals, cultures) that have

paid with their own death for the installation of a world circulation regulated by a single superpower avenge themselves today through this terrorist transference of the situation.

Terror against terror, there is no more ideology behind this. One is, from this point forward, far beyond ideology and politics. No ideology, no cause—not even the Islamic one—can explain the energy that feeds terror. It no longer aims at transforming the world. Like heresies in more ancient times, it aims at radicalizing the world through sacrifice, while the system aims at realizing the world by force.

Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a world diffusion of terrorism that functions as the shadow of any system of domination, everywhere ready to awaken as a double agent. It inhabits the very heart of the culture that battles it. There is no longer any demarcation which allows us to discern it and the visible fracture (and the hatred) that oppose, all over the world, the exploited and underdeveloped to the West, secretly coincides with the fracture internal to the dominant system. The West can face up to any visible forms of antagonism. But the other with its viral structure, as if the whole system of domination secreted its own anti-apparatus, its own ferment of disappearance, against this form of almost automatic reversion of its own power, the system can do nothing. Terrorism is the shock wave of this silent phenomenon of reversion.

It is therefore a clash neither of civilizations nor of religions, and this goes far beyond Islam and America, upon which one attempts to focus the conflict in order to give oneself the illusion of a visible confrontation, and solution, by the use of force. It is more a question of a fundamental antagonism but one that designates through the specter of America (that may be the epicenter but not all, in and of itself, the incarnation of globalization) and through the specter of Islam (which itself is not the incarnation of terrorism), triumphant globalization grappling with itself. Along those lines, one could even speak about a world war—not the third, but the fourth and only, truly global one, since its stake is globalization itself. The first two world wars correspond to the classical image of war. The first one put an end to the supremacy of Europe and the colonial era. The second terminated Nazism. The third, that indeed took place, in the form of the cold war and dissuasion, defeated Communism. From one to the next, one always moved ever closer toward a single world order. Today, this single world order, having virtually reached its term, finds itself grappling with antagonistic forces diffused

throughout the very heart of the global itself, present in all contemporary convulsions. It is a fractal, cellular war. It is a war of all singularities revolting like so many antibodies. This confrontation is so hard to grasp that, from time to time, it is necessary to salvage the very idea of war through spectacular staging (*mise-en-scène*), such as the Persian Gulf War or, now, the war in Afghanistan. But the fourth world war is elsewhere. It is what haunts all world order, all hegemonic domination. If Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam. It is the very world itself that resists globalization.

Terrorism is immoral. The World Trade Center event, this symbolic defiance, is immoral and responds to a globalization that is itself, also immoral. Consequently we have no choice but to become, ourselves, immoral, and, if we want to understand something in this event, we have to see a little beyond Good and Evil. It is so rare that one is given the opportunity to access an event that defies not only morals but all other forms of interpretations, that one must try to have the intelligence of Evil. And this is where the crucial point resides: in the total misconception of Western philosophy, that of the Enlightenment as to the relationship between Good and Evil. We naively believe that the progress of Good, its climb to power in all areas (science, technique, democracy, rights of man) corresponds to a defeat of Evil. Nobody seems to have understood that Good and Evil climb to power at the same time and in the same move. The triumph of the one does not imply the vanquishing of the other; indeed it is quite the contrary. Evil is often metaphysically considered an accidental mishap; but this axiom, from which flow all the Manichean forms of struggle between Good and Evil, is illusory. Good does not reduce Evil, nor the inverse moreover. They are both inextricably bound and irreducible to each other. At the bottom, Good could only defeat Evil by renouncing its claim to be Good, because appropriating a global monopoly on power implicates it in a backlash of proportional violence.

In the traditional universe, there was still an equilibrium between Good and Evil according to a dialectical relationship that willy-nilly kept the moral universe's tension and balance in check (similar to the cold war, when the two world superpowers face-to-face guaranteed the balance of terror). There was no supremacy of one over the other. This equilibrium is broken the moment there is a total extrapolation of Good (a hegemony of the positive over any form of negativity, the exclusion of death, of any potentially adverse

forms—the triumph of the values of Good in all areas). When this state is reached, equilibrium breaks down and it is as if Evil regains an invisible autonomy and expands exponentially.

All things being equal, it is a little bit like what is produced in the political sphere with the effacing of Communism and the global triumph of deregulated market forces. A phantasmatic enemy surges forward, permeating the whole planet, filtering through like a virus, emerging from all the interstices of power: Islam. Islam is only a moving front of the crystallization of this antagonism. This antagonism is everywhere and it is in each of us. Thus we have terror against terror—but asymmetrical terror. And it is this very asymmetry that leaves global power disarmed. Struggling with its own contradictions, globalization can only entrench itself in its own logic of power relations without being able to play on the field of symbolic defiance and death, about which it has no idea since it has erased death from its own culture.

Until now, this integrating superpower had widely succeeded in absorbing and reabsorbing all crisis and all negativity, creating in the same move a fundamentally agonizing situation, not only for the *damned of the earth* but also for its privileged ones ensconced in radical comfort. The event's fundamental difference is that the terrorists have stopped committing suicide for nothing, by efficiently and offensively putting their own death into play, according to a strategic intuition which very simply realized that the adversary is immensely fragile, that the system in its quasi-perfection is vulnerable to the least spark.

They succeeded in turning their own deaths into an absolute weapon against a system that lives off the exclusion of death, whose ideal is the dead zero (*zéro mort*). Any system at *dead zero* is a null-sum system, and all the means of dissuasion and destruction can do nothing against an enemy that has already turned its own death into counteroffensive weapon: "Who cares about American bombardments! Our men want to die as much as the Americans want to live!" Thence comes the disproportionate number of seven thousand dead inflicted in single blow to a dead zero system.²

Thus, here, everything is played out on death, not only because of the brutal irruption of death *live*, in real time, but because of the irruption of a "more than real" death: the symbolic and sacrificial death. This is the absolute event that does not tolerate any appeal.

Such is the spirit of terrorism.

Never attack the system in terms of the balance of power. That would be obeying the imaginary strategy (revolutionary) imposed by the system, which, in order to survive, ceaselessly brings those who battle it, on the terrain of reality which is forever its own. But move the struggle into the sphere of the symbolic, where the rule is that of defiance, reversion, and outbidding, such that death can only be responded to by an equal or superior death. The point is to defy the system by a sacrificial gift to which it can only answer with its own death and collapse.

The terrorist's hypothesis is that the system itself will commit suicide in response to multiple challenges posed in terms of death and suicide, for neither the system nor its power can escape the symbolic obligation. In this trap alone exists the only chance for their catastrophic scenario. In this vertiginous cycle of the impossible exchange of death, that of the terrorist is an infinitesimal point, but one that provokes a suction, a vacuum, a gigantic convection. Around this minute point, the whole system of reality and power, becomes denser, tetanizes itself, contracts and collapses in its own superefficiency.

The tactic of the terrorist model is to provoke an excess of reality and make the system collapse under the weight of that reality. The whole derisive dimension of the situation as well as the countermobilization of violence effectuated by the system power turn against the system itself, because terrorist acts both mirror exorbitantly the system's own violence and enact the symbolic violence that is forbidden to the system—that of its own death.

This is why all the visible and real power of the system cannot do much against the minute but symbolic death of a few individuals.

One must realize that a new terrorism is born, a new form of action, which plays the game and appropriates for itself the rules of the game in order to better perturb it. Not only do those people refuse to fight fair, since they bring their own death into play to which there is no possible response ("They are cowards"), they also appropriated for themselves the very weapons of the dominant power—money, stock market speculation, computer and aeronautic technologies, the specular dimensions and its media networks. They have assimilated all of these from modernity and globalization without deviating from their goal, which is to destroy them.

Adding insult to injury, they even used the daily banality of the American way of life as a mask: these people were two-faced. Sleeping in the suburbs, where they read and studied, with wife and kids, until one day they sprang

into action, like time bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestinity is as practically terrorist as the spectacular act of September 11, because it throws the cloak of suspicion on any individual. Isn't any inoffensive neighbor a potential terrorist? If they have passed unnoticed, then anyone (ourselves included) can be an unnoticed criminal (each airplane becomes suspect). And, at bottom, it is perhaps true. Perhaps it corresponds to an unconscious form of potential criminality, masked and carefully repressed, but always susceptible, if not to spring up, at least to vibrate secretly in time with the spectacle of Evil. Thus, the event ramifies itself in the little details, the source of a more subtle mental terrorism.

The radical difference is that the terrorists, while using the very weapons of the system itself, also have at their disposal a fatal weapon: their own death. If they had only turned the system's own weapons against itself, they would have been annihilated a long time ago. If they had only their own deaths to oppose it, they would have disappeared as quickly in a mere futile sacrifice. It is what terrorism has always done until now (for instance the Palestinian suicide bombings). This is why terrorism has been doomed to fail, until now.

The whole situation changes as soon as all available modern means are allied to the highly symbolic weapon of their own death. It multiplies the destructive potential *ad infinitum*. This multiplication of factors (which to us seem irreconcilable) gives the terrorists such superiority. The zero death strategy of a "clean" technological war misses the point of this transfiguration of "real" power by symbolic power.

The prodigious success of such a terrorist act poses a problem. In order to understand it, we must escape our Western point of view and try to go into the terrorists' minds and networks. Such an efficiency would presuppose on our behalf a maximum of cold rational calculation, rational brainstorming—the very rationality we find it so hard to imagine in others. And even if this was the case, there would have been, as with any rational organization or secret service, leaks and mistakes.

Hence, the secret of such a success is elsewhere. The difference is that, for the terrorists, it is not about a job contract, but a pact and sacrificial duty. Such an obligation is sheltered from all defection and corruption. The miracle is that it has been adapted to the globalization network, to the technological protocol, without losing the complicity between life and death. Contrary to the contract, a pact does not bind individuals (even their suicide does not equate with individual heroism). It is a collective sacrifice sealed

by the exigencies of ideals. It is the conjugation of two apparatuses, that of operational structure and that of a symbolic pact, which has made possible an act of such disproportionate nature.

We no longer have any idea what a symbolic reckoning is, as in poker or potlatch: minimal stake for maximum results. It is exactly what the terrorists obtained in Manhattan, and it well illustrates chaos theory: an initial shock provoking innumerable consequences, while the huge American military deployment (Desert Storm) only obtained derisive results—the hurricane, so to speak, ended up the battling of a butterfly's wings.

Suicidal terrorism is the terrorism of the have nots, but this is the terrorism of the rich. And this especially causes fear; they have become rich (and they have all the means) while wishing for our defeat. Of course, according to our value system, they cheat, since it's not fair play to put one's own death at stake. But they do not care, and the new rules of the game no longer belong to us.



We use everything possible to devalue their act. We call them suicidal or martyrs. Only to add in the same breath that martyrdom is ineffective, that it has nothing to do with truth, and that it is even (quoting Nietzsche) “enemy number one” of the truth. Of course their death does not prove anything. But there is nothing to prove anyway, in a system where truth itself is unattainable. Or is it that we are the only ones to hold the truth? This highly moralistic argument reverses itself. If the voluntary martyrdom of the kamikazes does not prove anything, then the involuntary martyrdom of September 11 victims does not prove anything either. There is something unbecoming and obscene in turning martyrdom into a moral argument (it judges beforehand their suffering and death).

Likewise, it does not hold that these terrorists exchange their deaths against a place in paradise. Consequently, their act is not a “pure free-will act” and therefore not authentic. Their act would be “free” only if they did not believe in God, and if their death was without hope, as it is for us. However, Christian martyrs hoped for nothing else but this sublime equivalence. Therefore, here again, the terrorists do not fight fair, since they are entitled to the eternal life of which we can no longer even entertain the hope. Thus we mourn for our own lack of death, while the terrorists can turn death into a high-definition wager.

At the bottom, cause, proof, truth, reward, ends, and means are typical

Western forms of accounting. We even evaluate death in terms of interest rates and quality-price relation. This economical reckoning is the calculation of the poor man, who no longer has the courage to put a price on it. What can happen, outside of war, which is itself but a conventional protective screen? One speaks of bioterrorism, of bacteriological war, or of nuclear terrorism, but all of this does not belong to the order of symbolic defiance, only to the order of the final solution: an annihilation without rhyme or reason, risk or glory.

It is a misunderstanding to see in the terrorist act a purely destructive logic. It seems to me that their own deaths cannot be separated from their act (it is precisely this connection that makes it a symbolic act) and it is not at all the impersonal elimination of the other. Everything resides in the defiance and the duel, in a dual, personal relation with the adverse power. Since it is the one that humiliates, it is the one that must be humiliated—and not simply exterminated. It must be made to lose face. This is never gained by mere force or by the suppression of the other. The other must be targeted and hurt in the full light of the adversarial struggle. In addition to the pact that binds terrorist to terrorist is some sort of a pact to duel with the adversary. It is therefore the contrary of the cowardice we accuse the terrorists of, and the opposite of what, for example, the Americans did during the Gulf War (and that they are doing in Afghanistan): invisible target/operational liquidation.

Of all these vicissitudes, we hold high the vision of the September 11 images. And we must hold on to the pregnancy of these images, and their fascination, since they constitute, like it or not, our primal scene. The images of New York, while they radicalize the world situation, have radicalized the relationship between image and reality. Amid the uninterrupted profusion of banal images and hyped events, the New York terrorist act has at once resuscitated images and events.

Terrorists have turned the system's weapons against it, and they have also exploited its real-time images and their instantaneous global diffusion. They appropriated them as well as stock exchange speculations, electronic information, and air traffic. The role of the image is highly ambiguous, for while it exalts the event, it also takes it hostage. The images play like an infinite multiplication, and at the same time they play like a diversion and neutralization (this had already happened for the events of May 1968 in France). This is what one always forgets when one speaks about the "dangers" of the

media. The image consumes the event insofar as it absorbs the event and gives it to the consumer. Of course, the image gives the consumer an impact heretofore unimaginable, but as an event-image.

What, then, is a real event if everywhere the image, fiction, virtuality peruse this very reality? In the present case, many believed (with a certain relief, perhaps) they saw the resurgence of the real, and of the violence of the real, within a universe pretending to be virtual: "There goes all your virtual stories! This is for real!" By the same token, many believed in a resurrection of history beyond its well-advertised end. So did reality actually overtake fiction? If it appears to have done so, it is only because reality absorbed the energy of fiction and itself became fiction. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction and real events are jealous of images . . . a sort of duel between them, to see who will be the most inconceivable.

The collapse of the Twin Towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. A surplus of violence is not sufficient to make an opening onto reality, because reality is a principle and this principle has been lost. Reality and fiction have become a tangled mess. The fascination with the terrorist act is first and foremost the fascination for an image (the jubilatory and catastrophic consequences being themselves mostly imaginary).

In this case, therefore, the real is added to the images as a bonus of terror, an extra shiver. Not only is it terrifying, but it is also real. Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the shiver of the image being added, the image comes first and the shiver of the real is added to it. It is something like one more fiction, a fiction going beyond fiction. J. J. Ballard (after Borges) spoke in this way about reinventing reality as the ultimate and most deadly fiction.

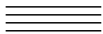
This terrorist violence is neither a reality backlash nor a history backlash. Not only is it terrifying, but what is more it is not "real," since it is worse than real in a certain way: it is symbolic. Violence in itself can be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence can generate singularity. In the singularity of this event, in this Manhattan catastrophe film, the two elements of mass fascination of the twentieth century are fused to the highest degree: the white magic of cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism.

After the fact, one tries to impose a meaning, any meaning on the event, to find any interpretation of it, but there is none. One finds instead the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is origi-

nal and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle. And against this immoral fascination (even if it unleashes a universal moral reaction) the political order is powerless. It is our own theater of cruelty; the only one left to us. It is an extraordinary one since it conjugates the acme of the spectacular with the acme of defiance. It is also the fulgurant micromodel of a kernel of real violence set in a maximized echo chamber (thus the purest possible form of the spectacular), and of a sacrificial model opposing the historic and politic model with the highest possible form of defiance.

The terrorists would be forgiven for any murder, if these murders had a meaning, if they could be interpreted as a historic form of violence—such is the moral axiom of “good violence.” The terrorist would be forgiven for any kind of violence, if this violence was not broadcast by the media (“Terrorism would be nothing without the media.”) But all this is illusory. There is no good use of the media: the media is part of the event itself, part of the terror, and its role plays in both directions.

The repressive act runs along the same unforeseeable spiral as the terrorist act: nobody knows when it is going to end and which reversals may occur. At the level of the image and information, it is not possible to distinguish between the spectacular and the symbolic, between the “crime” and its repression. And the uncontrollable chain of reversibility is the true victory of terrorism, a victory visible in the ramifications and subterranean infiltrations of the event—not only via direct economic, political, financial, and speculative recessions of the whole system, and the resulting moral and psychological recession that followed, but in the recession of the whole value system, the entire ideology of freedom, free trade, and so on, which is the pride of the Western world—everything it capitalizes on in order to exercise dominion all over the globe.



This repression has reached such a point that the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already effacing itself in mores and minds, and free-market globalization is in the process of actualizing itself in an exactly inverse form: a globalized police state of total control, with a security terror. Deregulation is ending up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions equivalent to those typical of a fundamentalist society.

The decline of production, consumption, speculation, and growth (but not of course of corruption), everything happens as if the world system oper-

ated a strategic retreat, a harrowing revision of its values. It appears to be a defensive response to the impact of terrorism, but deep down, it is a response to more secretive injunctions. The forced regulation issues from absolute disorder, but such that the system imposes it upon itself, internalizing somehow its own defeat.

Another aspect of the terrorists' victory is that all the other forms of violence and destabilization of order play in its favor: information technology terrorism, biological terrorism, anthrax and rumor, everything is attributed to bin Laden. He could even claim to be the source of natural catastrophes. All the forms of disorganization and perverse circulation work to his profit. The very structure of the generalized global exchange plays in favor of the impossible exchange. It is like an "automatic writing" of terrorism nourished again by the involuntary terrorism of information—with all the panicked consequences that ensue. If, in this anthrax story, intoxication plays itself through instantaneous crystallization, like in a chemical solution where a mere molecule would be immersed, it is because the system reached a critical mass that renders it vulnerable to any form of aggression.

There are no solutions to this extreme situation, above all not even war, which only offers an "already been there" type of solution, with the same deluge of military forces, "spook information," useless carpet bombings, pathetic and hypocritical speeches, technological deployment, and intoxication campaigns. In short, like the Gulf War, any solution would be a non-event, an event that did not really happen.

This, moreover, is its very *raison d'être*: to substitute a repetitive and déjà vu type of pseudo-event for a true and formidable event. The terrorist attack corresponds to the precession of the event over any of its interpretive models, while that of stupidly military and technological war corresponds inversely to a precession of the model over the event, therefore the factitious wager of a nonevent. War has become the prolongation of the absence of politics by other means.

—Translated by Michel Valentin, University of Montana, Missoula

Notes

- 1 "One way" manner of thinking.
- 2 The article was written a few days after September 11, which explains the numbers inaccuracy (translator's note).