

Chapter Six: Pornography of the Dead

Bin Laden understands the propaganda value of video and spent much time and effort in stage-managing his news conferences³⁵⁸ before he went into hiding. Gunfire and exploding rocket grenades regularly heralded bin Laden's arrival at his camp to create a dramatic staged entrance for waiting journalists. Bin Laden also created a whole range of recruitment videos showing Mujahideen training in his camps. Bin Laden's second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri surprised Peter Miller and his ABC news crew when he understood that they needed to get, and even used the term, 'B' Roll for their report on al-Qaeda.³⁵⁹ Bin Laden would often hire 'extras' to sit around him with their guns for some of his staged press conferences and he would often plant people to ask him certain questions.³⁶⁰ Another intriguing part of al-Qaeda videos is the constant allusion to mythical and religious references. Al-Qaeda training videos and press releases were duplicated and release to the public and to al-Jazeera. After September 11 elements of these recruitment videos were used over and over again as 'B' roll for news broadcast, to such an extent that the same sequence of a number of hooded fighters training, has become an icon representing al-Qaeda. Post-September 11, Al-Qaeda has its own production house called as-Sahab that can disseminate new propaganda in days rather than weeks. As-Sahab, like al-Qaeda, is decentralized.³⁶¹ It has become increasingly sophisticated, for instance using chroma-key technologies to composite banners and Islamic books in the backgrounds of its videos.³⁶²

³⁵⁸ Wright, Lawrence *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 262.

³⁵⁹ Wright, *Ibid.*, 265.

³⁶⁰ Wright, *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁶¹ Jason Burke, "Secrets of bomber's death tape," *The Observer*, September 4, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/alqaida/story/0,,1562409,00.html>

³⁶² Kim Zetter, "Researcher's Analysis of al Qaeda Images Reveals Surprises -- UPDATED," *Wired Magazine*, August 02, 2007,

<http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2007/08/researchers-ana.html>

Jihadi Media

Video has played a major part in the Islamist movement since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These videos were crude, often featuring a leading Islamist authority calling for Jihad, spliced with news footage of the war against the Soviets.³⁶³ The first innovation in Jihadi video was martyrdom videos created by Hezbollah in the 1980s and 1990s. Hezbollah strengthened their cult of martyrdom by videotaping the “living martyr’s” last will. These videos tend to have the martyrs dressed in full commando gear, cradling a Kalashnikov with the organization’s banner in the background. The living martyr describes his or her reason for martyrdom. The next scene is often a videotape of the actual martyrdom operation. Manar TV, Hezbollah’s television station, broadcasts these videos alongside their more conventional programming.³⁶⁴ The living martyr’s will video has become part of the operational norm of all suicide bombing campaigns. The Tamil Tigers were also innovated in their recording of martyrdom operations; the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by Black Tigress Dhanu was videotaped. The videographer was too close to the bomber and was killed in the blast, but the final frames of the video survived.³⁶⁵

The most innovative tactic of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the now-deceased leader of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (Iraq), was the use of the Internet and especially Internet video as a psychological weapon. Jihadi websites are the main propagandist tool of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. The websites are ideal for releasing video propaganda, which then makes its way into the mainstream media. Zarqawi realized the propaganda value of video early in the conflict and made sure that three videographers taped every major operation.³⁶⁶ In film and video production, the use of multiple cameras is usually

³⁶³ Jason Burke, “Theatre of terror”, *The Observer*, November 21, 2004, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1355798,00.html>

³⁶⁴ Christoph Reuter’s *My Life as a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, Translated by Helena Ragg-Kirkby, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 74.

³⁶⁵ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. (New York: Random House, 2005), 227–8.

³⁶⁶ Abdel bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al Qaeda*, (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 12.

limited to three types of events: live events, special effects, and pornography. Live events are filmed so that the director can switch between camera operators to get good coverage of the event. Special effects are shot with multiple cameras, as production budget rarely can afford to restage the explosions and complex action scenes. Pornographic scenes are shot from different angles for a graphic angle for standard distribution channels: home video, DVD, and the Internet, with a less graphic angle for cable television and for hotel in-room channels. Zarqawi's Internet videos comprise all three of these types of video. Suicide attacks are live events and are therefore unpredictable. And like expensive special effects they are unrepeatable. The propaganda value of these videos has different audiences with ranging sensibilities. The graphic nature of some the videos are meant to both terrorize Zarqawi's enemies and excite his more extreme followers. The suicide bomber is also aware that his attack is being filmed and is under added pressure to go through with the martyrdom operation, knowing that his martyrdom will be shown to a greater audience. Other videos and other angles are created to show the heroic struggle of the insurgents and therefore do not show the most graphic images. Among these videos, the most shocking are only available in full on the Internet as they are too extreme to be shown, at least in their entirety, on television.

The term gonzo, often misattributed to Hunter S. Thompson, is borrowed by and applied to porn to describe some of the most hardcore pornography. Gonzo pornography makes no pretence to create story or scenario, adopts an amateur-styled subjective viewpoint, and consists of nothing but pornography. While terrorism has been long compared with pornography, "In a real sense, terrorism is like pornography: You know it when you see it, but it is impossible to come up with a universally agreed upon definition,"³⁶⁷ now boundaries between terrorism and pornography are become indistinguishable. Many of Zarqawi's videos work within a similar framework to gonzo pornography's. He has created a new extreme form of terrorism:

³⁶⁷ Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford. 2002. 17

gonzo terrorism. The video is designed to help viewers identify themselves with the protagonist—to be the Jihadist. In place of the money shot—the ejaculation—is the explosion. The bombers body becomes the ejaculate; it becomes organic shrapnel—shrapnel that wounds and kills others.

Zarqawi's videos of the beheadings of foreign hostages are examples par excellence of gonzo terrorism, no doubt influenced by the post-September 11 video of the beheading of the journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan. In that video, the camera was inadvertently turned off at the moment of the beheading and therefore only decapitated head was shown. Zarqawi's beheading of Nicholas Berg, who was costumed in an orange jumpsuit reminiscent of the prisoners at Guantánamo, was a carefully stage-managed affair. Subsequent beheading videos added a new layer of terror, as the victims were aware of their fate: The Korean translator Kim Sun-Il who, unlike Nicholas Berg understood his captors is an example. British hostage Kenneth Bigely was kept in a chicken cage—another macabre prop in this terrorist mise-en-scène. Zarqawi even released a highly polished forty-six minute film on the Internet entitled *All Religion Will be for Allah* on June 29, 2005.³⁶⁸ In August 2005, another al-Qaeda in Iraq release was a seventeen-minute film featuring a “Top Ten” of insurgent attacks. Zarqawi has turned propaganda of the dead into pornography of the dead. He added these terrorist snuff films to the psychological arsenal of terrorism. While these videos repulsed many in the Muslim world, they firmly established Zarqawi and his group as the leader of all of the Sunni Islamic resistance in Iraqi and propelled him to a hitherto unknown Internet-driven terrorist celebrity status. His willingness to kill with his own hands, publicly and with such calculated barbarism, propelled him beyond bin Laden in the public imagination, and earned him the name of the Slaughtering Sheik. Zarqawi melded his former life as a street thug with his Islamism and al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia became the most violent and brutal gang in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia uses not only Internet video, but forums, and frequent newsletters for propaganda and

³⁶⁸ Atwan, *Ibid.*, 124.

recruitment. This has maintained a steady stream of martyrs and money pouring into Iraq from neighboring Arabic countries and even amongst the Asian and North African Diasporas in Europe. The martyrs come already prepared to die—they have been indoctrinated online—and are quickly used for suicide missions. Strategically, these martyrs need little training or knowledge of Iraq. The jihad is now orchestrated through cyberspace.

It has become clear that the US occupation in Iraq is al-Qaeda's greatest recruiting tool and until the occupation ends there will be no shortage of volunteers. A US withdrawal will not necessarily end the sectarian strife in the region; it is more likely that the civil war in Iraq will continue unabated and it will also be proxy war for the region. Sunni suicide bombers will still target Shi'a civilians and security forces; the Shi'a will counter the Sunnis with their militias and death squads. Al-Qaeda will thrive in the chaos of the failed state. But al-Qaeda can offer nothing but death. It has no positive ideology. It is a reactionary force. This is al-Qaeda's greatest weakness and, unless fed by foreign occupations, it will eventually consume itself.

The jihadis in Iraq have found a new paradigm in which to frame their propaganda of the dead into a form of pornography: gonzo terrorism. September 11 was the ultimate example of propaganda of the dead—a global televised media event blockbuster that transformed terrorist propaganda forever.

The Spectacle of September 11

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on the US were broadcast live across the globe to billions of people. It was the largest and deadliest terrorism spectacular to date. Many heralded the attacks as a major event in history—an event that changed everything—but is this analysis valid? Certainly the attacks changed much in American foreign and domestic policy and the security policies of other nations. Much of the rhetoric espoused since the attacks is aimed at justifying new directions in such policies. The lives of the victims and the first responders and all of their families were irrevocably changed, but this does not mean that the September 11 was a true “event” in the philosophical sense?

Media Event

It is important that we separate the terrible events of that day from their perceived consequences. Derrida points out when it comes to examining the attacks of September 11 we must “distinguish between two ‘impressions.’”³⁶⁹ The first impression combines compassion for the victims and indignation over the killings. These are responses to the attacks that are unconditional and go “beyond all simulacra and all possible virtualization.”³⁷⁰ The second impression is “the interpreted, interpretative, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us *believe* that this is a ‘major event.’”³⁷¹ Feeling indignation over mass murder and compassion for the victims is a natural and authentic response. But it must be distinguished from the incessant interpretation that this was an “unprecedented” event and an act that inevitably leads to war.³⁷² These are two distinct things: the attacks themselves and the interpretation of their consequences.

The attacks can be fully condemned without supporting the notion that they justified a *casus belli*—a case for war, and a case for a just war. Slavoj Žižek cautioned that we must avoid the temptation of the double blackmail. “If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by the Third World Evil.”³⁷³ On the other hand “if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved.”³⁷⁴ Žižek advised, “The only possible solution here is to reject this very opposition and to adopt both positions simultaneously.”³⁷⁵ It is important to not to fall into the ethical trap that, while the attack on the World Trade

³⁶⁹ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: five essays on September 11 and related dates*. (London and New York: Verso Books, 2002), 50.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

Center was a tragedy, we cannot fully solidarize with the victims without supporting US imperialism. The only solution is to fully solidarize with *all* the victims. Simply put “the choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both ‘Them’ against Us.”³⁷⁶ With the removal of the false dichotomy possibilities other than war with Afghanistan are more conceivable.

The attack on the WTC was conceived from the outset as a media event.³⁷⁷ It was possible after the first plane crashed into the north tower to believe that it was a horrible accident. In the sixteen-minute interval between plane crashes there was sufficient time for the media to set up cameras focused on the towers and to broadcast live the second plane flying towards and crashing into the south tower. Baudrillard defined this as the “spirit of terrorism” which is “... all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time—‘live’, so to speak—but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial—that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event.”³⁷⁸ This symbolic death is the death of the suicidal terrorists, perceived as both martyrs and murderers, and the deaths of their victims. The violent irruption of death on such a large scale converted the suicide bombers’ “psychological atom bomb”³⁷⁹ into a psychological hydrogen bomb,³⁸⁰ dropped on Manhattan and broadcast live around the world.

The sudden interruption of the flow of time by the attacks created shockwaves into the farthest regions of the globe.³⁸¹ The

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 52.

³⁷⁷ , In the transcript of videotape sent by bin Laden to Aljazeera on October 28, 2004 Bin Laden describes seeing television footage of bombing of high rise towers in Lebanon in 1982 by the Israelis as the germ for September 11 attacks on the WTC. Transcript is available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/English/archive/archive?ArchiveId=7403>

³⁷⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso Books, 2002), 16–7.

³⁷⁹ Christoph Reuter, *My Life as a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, 77.

³⁸⁰ The first hydrogen bomb yielded an explosion 450 times that of the first atomic bomb.

³⁸¹ Bernhard Debatin, “Plane wreck with spectators” in Greenberg, Bradley S. ed. *Communication and Terrorism: Public and Media Responses to 9/11* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc., 2002), 164.

symbolic space of time that is created by the synchronization of modern technology and the media was ruptured. Time seemed to stand still on a global level. This was part of the terrorists' strategy and helped enforce a feeling of the dawning of a new era where everything had changed.³⁸² This extended the "fallout" of the suicide attacks from their localized destruction of downtown Manhattan and the Pentagon to a disruption on a global scale. This disruption can be seen as a deadly variant of Paul Virilio's information bomb.³⁸³ Virilio contends that with each technology comes with its own integral accident. In the Industrial Age, the invention of new technologies, the steam engine, the airplane, and nuclear power plants, also invented new accidents: derailments, plane crashes, and Chernobyl. The integral accident pales in comparison to deliberate and deadly sabotage, to weaponize technologies, to utilize the integral weapon. The terrorist attacks on the WTC created an informational bomb that sent global informational shockwaves disrupting economies, stock markets, and the lives of millions. The global media system's ability to televise events live around the world was hijacked to broadcast this propaganda of the dead.

³⁸² Ibid., 164.

³⁸³ Paul Virilio, "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" *CTheory* Articles: a030, 8/27/1995. www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72

Propaganda of the Dead

Baudrillard contends that the terrorists took over “the weapons of the dominant power. Money and stock-market speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and the media networks—they have assimilated everything of modernity and globalism, without changing their goals, which is to destroy that power.”³⁸⁴ This new symbolic weapon—the suicide attacks of September 11—was an opposite and unequal reaction to the military and economic power of America and its Western allies. After sixty years of investing heavily in the military-industrial sectors, the West has achieved a supreme technological advantage. This technological advantage has led to a military strategy that Baudrillard refers to as the zero-death strategy.³⁸⁵ In the First Gulf War, the Western powers were triumphant, especially about their incredibly low number of casualties. The ease of victory, with so few casualties, added insult to injury to the perception in the Arab World of another humiliating defeat of an Arab army by Western powers. Strategists intent on waging war against the West, and the United States in particular, came to the conclusion that the only way to combat the West’s technological war and its zero death strategy was to inflict mass casualties. An unacceptably large number of US soldiers dying would undermine public support for the war. The US could not be defeated militarily, but its resolve could be undermined by an unpopular war.³⁸⁶

This idea was first tested soon after the first Gulf War, in 1993, in Mogadishu, Somalia. The Americans quickly withdrew their troops after the death and mutilation of 19 soldiers. Al Qaeda and other strategists concluded that it was possible to deflate such military-humanitarian interventions with a few well-publicized Western casualties. This strategy was deliberately implemented in Rwanda, where Hutu extremists brutally

³⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸⁵ Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁸⁶ This was the lesson these strategists took from the Vietnam War, the only war the US lost. Since Vietnam, massive suicide bombings had driven the Americans and the French from Lebanon, in 1983.

murdered ten Belgian UN peacekeepers.³⁸⁷ The Belgian government immediately withdrew its troops, the backbone of the peacekeeping mission, leaving General Dallaire with a small contingent of Ghanaian and Dutch troops. He was helpless in the face of the resulting genocide.

In opposition to the technological war and its precision-targeted munitions, terrorism has grown more indiscriminate and deadlier. Technological war tries to limit civilian casualties while suicidal terrorism tries to maximize them. On September 11, the terrorists inverted the American military's supreme technological advantage, the ability to deliver precision munitions anywhere in the world. The terrorists sought to create massive and indiscriminate casualties and kill themselves in the process. They did so by using against the West the very symbols of globalization and modernity: the jet plane and the skyscraper. While the attack on the Pentagon wounded American military pride, the massive disruption of the global economy by the attack on the World Trade Center created was far more significant: it was an attack on world business itself.³⁸⁸

Baudrillard states that "...they are cheating. It is not playing fair to throw one's own death into the game. But this does not trouble them, and the new rules are not ours to determine."³⁸⁹ Indeed, by killing themselves and so many innocent civilians, the terrorists have transformed the notion of propaganda of the deed into propaganda of the dead. Their sacrificial deaths, both of the willing and unwilling, of the terrorists and their victims, was a grand symbolic gesture of violence. Baudrillard cautions us not to mistake this violence as a blowback of reality or a blowback of history: "It is not 'real'. In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic."³⁹⁰ It is defiant, symbolic violence. There is no meaning or interpretation to this act beyond the "radicality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of the spectacle upon us."³⁹¹

³⁸⁷ "Ghosts of Rwanda" *Frontline*, directed by Greg Barker, Boston, MA: WGBH, 2004.

³⁸⁸ Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero*. Translated by Chris Turner, New York and London: Verso Books, 2002, 81.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

It is clear that Brian Jenkins's argument of the theatricality of terrorism³⁹² is no longer applicable; now terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people dead. This spectacle of terrorism has become according to Baudrillard "our theater of cruelty... extraordinary in that it unities the most extreme degree of the spectacular and the highest level of challenge."³⁹³ To understand twenty-first century spectacular terrorism we must see it in a new framework—that of *propaganda of the dead*. Propaganda of the dead is a new form of simulation—disenchanted simulation. Baudrillard described disenchanted simulation in his earlier work *Seduction*, in which he splits simulation into two distinct forms: enchanted simulation and disenchanted simulation. Enchanted simulation is the form of simulation that is promoted by late stage capitalism. It seduces you through *trompe l'oeil*; it is more false than false. *Trompe l'oeil* works by fooling the eye. It simulates a dimension where there is none. "We are bewitched by the smell of the missing dimension. It is the latter that establishes the space of seduction..."³⁹⁴ This is the source of its power and its ability to seduce. Las Vegas and Hollywood are examples par excellence of the seductive power of Western globalised economic and technological power.³⁹⁵

The terrorists are using the other model, that of disenchanted simulation, which is "more real than real."³⁹⁶ In *Seduction*, Baudrillard attributes the disenchanted simulation to pornography, which is more real than real sex. He states "Pornography is the quadrophonics of sex. Pornography adds a third and fourth track to the sexual act"³⁹⁷ to become more real than real. Pornography adds a dimension and loses its ability to seduce. It is here where the clean technological war of the West

³⁹² Brian Michael Jenkins, "Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?" *Rand Report P-5541* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1975), 4, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P5541/>

³⁹³ Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁹⁵ Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, (London and New York: The New Press, 2004), 321.

³⁹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 60.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

meets propaganda of the dead. The zero death strategy tries to minimize and remove death from war; propaganda of the dead maximizes death and adds its own death to war. Suicidal terrorism is the quadrophonics of death; it is deadlier than death. By being more real than real it shatters the illusion of *trompe l'oeil* and nullifies its seductive powers. It does so by returning death to war; it shatters the appearance of control. This is where its power lies. As Baudrillard states in the introduction to *Seduction*, “Every revolution, in its beginnings, seeks to end the seduction of appearances.”³⁹⁸ This was part an integral part of the strategy of September 11—to shatter the illusion of invincibility of the only superpower and to bring the US’s military dominance to the forefront. Wolfgang Schirmacher states “No media event has the authority to enforce action—propaganda’s heyday is over.”³⁹⁹ This is not the case when it comes to propaganda of the dead; its combination of media and murder enforces action or at the very least reaction.

Disenchanted simulation plays a part in reality television; it too wants to be more real than real. Reality television has two distinct forms: that of the carefully contrived but “unscripted” network reality television; and that of real events “caught on tape.” These two models of reality TV were in play on September 11. First, by the terrorists, who carefully planned the twin attack on the World Trade Center up to the moment of impact, and second, by the media professionals and civilian spectators, who videoed and photographed the attacks and the subsequent collapses of the towers.

Part of the horror of... memorable coups of contemporary photojournalism... comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* 27.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., Introduction.

³⁹⁹ Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Homo generator: Media and Postmodern Technology” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery eds. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 78.

It was instinctual for many to grab a camera and shoot the burning towers—to simultaneously document and distance themselves; to witness and to preserve; to do something in a moment of impotency.

Throughout that day, television stations aired images of the planes crashing into buildings and buildings burning. This footage was added to the global image bank of the attacks. It was a global, televised, live event on the scale of the Olympics or the World Cup. Baudrillard assessed the attack as having an “unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.”⁴⁰⁰ The terrorists knowingly “exploited the ‘real-time’ of images.”⁴⁰¹ Outside of New York and Washington D.C., these television images alone consumed the event, absorbed its power and offered it up for consumption. Habermas contends, “The presence of cameras and of the media was also new, transforming the local event simultaneously into a global one and the whole world population into a benumbed witness,”⁴⁰² thus constituting “the first historic world event in the strictest sense... a gruesome reality took place in front of the ‘universal eyewitness’ of the global public.”⁴⁰³ While this is an historic world event in so far as it was broadcast live around the globe it is an image-event or media event rather than an epochal shift in history.

Propaganda of the dead relies on disenchanting simulation to be more real than real. It is the opposite of the zero death strategy of the modern technological war machine; it is more death than death. It creates brutal, violent, and indiscriminate images of death, death both sacrificial and unjust. It is savage carnage aimed at a screen near you.

⁴⁰⁰ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 27.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁰² Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, 28.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 28.

Disaster Movie

The attacks on the World Trade Center embodied drama, heroism, and tragedy. They seemed so familiar yet indescribable that many of the spectators related that it seemed like a Hollywood movie.⁴⁰⁴ The main drama of the attack—from the first plane hitting the North Tower to the collapse of the North Tower—lasted about the length of a Hollywood disaster movie, just under two hours—102 minutes. The relation of the attacks on the WTC and the Hollywood disaster movie is not simply a glib aside but remains the frame in which the attacks were experienced and the two different forms of simulation: enchanted and disenchanting simulation.

Slavoj Žižek provides insight into interpreting the attacks by asking for us to invert the standard reading of September 11 in “which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere,” that America was caught up in a hedonistic illusion that was only concerned with rising stock markets and globalization and this was the illusion shattered on September 11 by the attacks. He states that the reverse happened. Before the WTC collapse we only experienced Third World horrors as “a spectral apparition” on our television screens. What happened on September 11 was that this “fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality.”⁴⁰⁵

It is noteworthy that immediately after the attacks many Hollywood blockbuster films with similar themes (buildings on fire or terrorist attacks) were postponed. Images of the WTC were hurriedly removed digitally from shots in *Zoolander*. In the movie *Spiderman*, scenes shot at the WTC were deleted and new scenes of united and emboldened New Yorkers fighting back against the bad guy were added. But for Žižek the “question we should have asked ourselves as we started at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*”⁴⁰⁶ September 11 was reminiscent of

⁴⁰⁴ Neal Gabler, “This Time, The Scene Was Real” *New York Times*, September 16, 2001. Late Edition 4.2

⁴⁰⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 16.

⁴⁰⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Ibid.*, 16.

Hollywood films because it contained a mixture of simulations, the enchanted simulation of Hollywood and the disenchanting simulation of terrorism. As Baudrillard states, “In this Manhattan disaster movie, the twentieth century’s two elements of mass fascination are combined: the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism.”⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 29–30.

New Age of the Paranoiac Warfare

The September 11 attacks differed from other terrorist attacks in the lack of explanation for the attack by the perpetrators themselves. In the past, terrorists planned and then issued a press release shortly after an attack, carefully explaining their position and justifying their actions. Al Qaeda never did so and it was months before even a vague affirmation from Osama bin Laden reached the world's media.⁴⁰⁸ It was only on the first anniversary of the attack that Al-Qaeda explicitly claimed responsibility.⁴⁰⁹ In the meantime, Al Qaeda and bin Laden become household names globally. This was a remarkable and highly effective strategy. It allowed less-committed supporters to condemn these attacks on innocent civilians while supporting the terrorists overall anti-western ideology. For these reasons, Žižek proclaimed that we have entered into “a new era of paranoiac warfare in which the greatest task will be to identify the enemy and his weapons.”⁴¹⁰ Al-Qaeda's tacit acknowledgement of the attacks and the secrecy of anti-terrorist countermeasures employed by the state have created “an ideal breeding-ground for conspiracy theories and generalized social paranoia.”⁴¹¹

Such contradictory opinions about the September 11 attacks have now become widespread, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Shortly after the September 11 attacks, a conspiracy theory started to circulate in the Arab world: that Israel's infamous intelligence agency—Mossad—had planned the attacks. Mossad had even notified all the Jews who worked in the World Trade Center to stay home that day.⁴¹² A variant of this theory is that groups within the CIA planned the attacks to

⁴⁰⁸ Osama Bin Laden video excerpts *BBC News*, Friday, 14 December, 2001, 14:00 GMT

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1709425.stm Full transcript available

<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2001/d20011213ubl.pdf>

⁴⁰⁹ Brian Whitaker and agencies, “Bin Laden voice on video, says TV channel: Al-Qaida tape finally claims responsibility for attacks”, *The Guardian*, September 10, 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/alqaida/story/0,,798048,00.html>

⁴¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 37.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴¹² Glen A. Tobias and Abraham H. Foxman, *Unraveling Anti-Semitic 9/11 Conspiracy Theories*, Anti-Defamation League (New York: Gorowitz Institute, 2003), 2–3.

http://www.adl.org/anti_semitism/9-11conspiracytheories.pdf

provide justification for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq; their motive was access to geostrategic oil resources. Both versions allow the blame for the attacks to be placed on the West and its allies, and away from the Jihadists. The main justification for such conspiracy theories is hindsight, based on the post-September 11 actions of the America and Israel. The Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan has helped strengthen even the most taciturn support of radical Islamism. Nearly all the September 11 conspiracy theories pivot on one of two assumptions: first, the Bush Administration and small groups in the US intelligence circles had prior knowledge of the attack and let it happen, or second that the Bush administration planned the attacks and therefore made it happen. The three most popular conspiracy theories claim a cruise missile was used in the attack on the Pentagon rather than civilian aircraft; explosives were used in a controlled explosion to bring down the WTC; and flight United 93 was shot down by a military aircraft. Evidence for these conspiracy theories is flimsy at best. Conspiracy advocates note a flickering, blurry frame of video of WTC that they claim is evidence of a controlled explosion.⁴¹³ They do not try to explain what happened to the missing planes or how the explosives were brought into the World Trade Center either before or when it was burning. They are, however, pervasive and have gained traction with the public to such an extent that Time magazine published an article "Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won't Go Away" for the fifth anniversary of the attacks.⁴¹⁴ The author cites a poll that reported "36% of Americans consider it 'very likely' or 'somewhat likely' that government officials either allowed the attacks to be carried out or carried out the attacks themselves."

In examining all the evidence and by using Ockham's razor as a guiding principle, it is safe to conclude that the only conspiracy behind September 11 was al-Qaeda's. The sheer scale of the cover up that would be required to implement many of these theories is unfathomable. It is nonetheless noteworthy

⁴¹³ Confronting the Evidence, DVD, 2004

⁴¹⁴ Lev Grossman, "Why the 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Won't Go Away," *Time Magazine*, September 3, 2006.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1531304-1,00.html>

that people find it more comforting to believe in the nefarious power of intelligence agencies rather than in their ineptness, i.e. that big events must have big causes. A significant portion of the radical Left in the US has been spending significant amounts of energy trying to prove something that can never be sufficiently proven. Not only does it sap political energy and credibility from the Left, it ignores the real problems, those that have been created since September 11 under the guise of stopping another September 11.

Trauma

Terrorism is a political and psychological weapon. The attacks of September 11 were the psychological hydrogen bomb of suicide terrorism. This was the epochal moment of propaganda of the dead. The extent of trauma of this psychological attack is for Derrida present in the name of the attack—9/11 or September 11. What does it mean to name an event with a date?⁴¹⁵ On a practical level, the multiple attacks on the day make it hard to name a specific location e.g. Pearl Harbor or the Gulf of Tonkin but it is more than that. It is for Derrida, a way to name something that is beyond language: terror and trauma. It is noteworthy that the Madrid train bombings of 2004 are often referred to as 3/11 and that the London tube and bus attacks of 2005 are often referred to as 7/7. The naming of traumatic events by their dates is not just a simplistic media terminology. Derrida challenged, “We must rethink the temporalization of a traumatism if we want to comprehend in what way ‘September 11’ *looks like* a ‘major event.’ For the wound remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past.”⁴¹⁶ “Traumatism for Derrida is produced by the future, not by an aggression that is over and done with; it is the threat of the worst to come. This is the psychological trauma created by the attacks. The attacks inaugurated a new epoch of fear and dread, of apocalyptic vulnerability. The date refers to this traumatic moment, not simply to the attacks and the victims, but the act of

⁴¹⁵ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, 147.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

witnessing the attacks and of living through that day. As Baudrillard stated in 1993 “We know that any natural accident or catastrophe may be claimed as a terrorist act, and vice versa.... It is in this respect, in fact, that the whole system is globally terroristic. A greater terror than the terror of violence and accident is the terror of uncertainty and dissuasion.”⁴¹⁷ This is the heart of trauma created on September 11.

The American media chose to self-censor some of the worst scenes at the World Trade Center. There was a deliberate decision not to air the most gruesome footage,⁴¹⁸ especially the footage of the estimated 200 people who jumped to their deaths from the top of the burning towers. This was “to limit the human carnage it showed on the air,”⁴¹⁹ something that is not normally considered when reporting on traumatic events in other countries. Despite this effort to limit the human carnage on that day, the constant repetition of the footage of the planes crashing into the towers was damaging in itself. Parents of little children claimed it was traumatizing their children who thought the attacks were happening over and over again.⁴²⁰

Avital Ronell states, “Television produces corpses that need not be mourned,”⁴²¹ But when on September 11 death erupted live on television, how were the dead to be mourned? This was a call that could not be answered; it was instead dissuaded by a counter narrative, one in which television excels: heroes. These heroes were the first responders—the selfless firefighters, police officers, and EMT workers—who rushed into the burning

⁴¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 42.

⁴¹⁸ Kristen Mogensen, Laura Lindsay, Xigen Li, Jay Perkins, Mike Beardsley, “How TV News Covered the Crisis: The Content of CNN, CBS, ABC, NBC and FOX” in Greenberg, Bradley S. ed. *Communication and Terrorism: Public and Media Responses to 9/11* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc., 2002), 111.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴²⁰ Center for the Advancement of Health “One Year Later: Post-Traumatic Stress Takes Toll on Children” Facts of Life: Issue Briefings for Health Reporters, Vol. 7, No. 9, (September 2002).

<http://www.cfah.org/factsoflife/vol7no9.cfm>

⁴²¹ Avital Ronell “Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery eds. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 78.

buildings and many of whom died when the towers collapsed. These rescue workers fulfilled a psychological need for unambiguous heroism and selflessness in the wake of murderous and deliberate destruction. But this need was amplified through the media to such an extent that it generated a twenty-first century hagiography: turning heroes into saints. In narrative terms these secular saints countered the Islamic martyrs.

Brutality TV

Images of terrorism are always aimed at multiple and different audiences. They are designed to thrill and to terrify, to titillate and to nauseate and it is this combination that makes them so powerful. The Arabic and Greek word for martyr also means witness. Suicide bombers use their deaths to bear witness to their sacrifice and to their belief in that sacrifice. They know that their sacrifice (or its results) will be broadcast across the Middle East and—if it is spectacular enough—perhaps the world. In the words of Jean Baudrillard “The aim is not to transform the world but (as the heresies did in their day) to radicalize the world by sacrifice.”⁴²² Their sacrifice demands the attention of others and begs the question “what are you willing to sacrifice?” These outrages are designed to bring out rage, to polarize populations, to divide societies between us and them, occupiers and terrorists, liberators and freedom fighters. To force an answer to “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”⁴²³—all terrorist organizations claim that their enemies are the *real* terrorists. We must remember that this is a false opposition that “they are both ‘Them’ against Us.”⁴²⁴

Terror and revolution have become intertwined with reality television and have created brutality TV. Whether we are titillated, or nauseated, or both is of little consequence; we

⁴²² Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 10.

⁴²³ George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 9/20/2001.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

remain both a spectator and a participant. This, as Baudrillard stated, “is *our* theatre of cruelty.”⁴²⁵

⁴²⁵ Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 30.