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L'esprit du terrorisme [The Spirit of Terrorism]

Jean Baudrillard

*Translated by Dr Rachel Bloul, School of Social
Sciences,
Australian National University.*

*In italics: details about not-quite-direct
translations.*

We have had many global events from Diana's death to the World Cup, or even violent and real events from wars to genocides. But not one global symbolic event, that is an event not only with global repercussions, but one that questions the very process of globalization. All through the stagnant 90s, there has been "la greve des evenements" (*literally "an events strike", translated from a phrase of the Argentino writer Macedonio Fernandez*). Well, the strike is off. We are even facing, with the World Trade Center & New York hits, the absolute event, the "mother" of events, the pure event which is the essence of all the events that never happened.

Not only are all history and power plays disrupted, but so are the conditions of analysis. One must take one's time. For as long as events were at a standstill, one had to anticipate and overcome them. But when they speed up, one must slow down; without getting lost under a mass of discourses and the shadow of war ("*nuage de la guerre*": *literally clouds announcing war*), and while keeping undiminished the unforgettable flash of images.

All the speeches and commentaries betray a gigantic abreaction to the event itself and to the fascination that it exerts. Moral condemnation and the sacred union against terrorism are equal to the prodigious jubilation engendered by witnessing this global superpower being destroyed; better, by seeing it more or less self-destroying, even suiciding spectacularly.

Though it is (*this superpower*) that has, through its unbearable power, engendered all that violence brewing around the world, and therefore this terrorist imagination which -unknowingly- inhabits us all.

That we have dreamed of this event, that everybody without exception has dreamt of it, because everybody must dream of the destruction of any power hegemonic to that degree, - this is unacceptable for Western moral conscience, but it is still a fact, and one which is justly measured by the pathetic violence of all those discourses which attempt to erase it.

It is almost they who did it, but we who wanted it. If one does not take that into account, the event lost all symbolic dimension to become a pure accident, an act purely arbitrary, the murderous fantasy of a few fanatics, who would need only to be suppressed. But we know very well that

this is not so. Thus all those delirious, counter-phobic exorcisms: because evil is there, everywhere as an obscure object of desire. Without this deep complicity, the event would not have had such repercussions, and without doubt, terrorists know that in their symbolic strategy they can count on this unavowable complicity.

This goes much further than hatred for the dominant global power from the disinherited and the exploited, those who fell on the wrong side of global order. That malignant desire is in the very heart of those who share (*this order's*) benefits. An allergy to all definitive order, to all definitive power is happily universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center embodied perfectly, in their very double-ness (*literally twin-ness*), this definitive order.

No need for a death wish or desire for self-destruction, not even for perverse effects. It is very logically, and inexorably, that the (*literally: "rise to power of power"*) exacerbates a will to destroy it. And power is complicit with its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, one could feel that they answered the suicide of the kamikazes by their own suicide. It has been said: "God cannot declare war on Itself". Well, It can. The West, in its God-like position (of divine power, and absolute moral legitimacy) becomes suicidal, and declares war on itself.

Numerous disaster movies are witness to this phantasm, which they obviously exorcise through images and submerge under special effects. But the universal attraction these movies exert, as pornography does, shows how (*this phantasm's*) realization is always close at hand - the impulse to deny any system being all the stronger if such system is close to perfection or absolute supremacy.

It is even probable that the terrorists (like the experts!) did not anticipate the collapse of the Twin Towers, which was, far more than (*the attack of*) the Pentagon, the deepest symbolic shock. The symbolic collapse of a whole system is due to an unforeseen complicity, as if, by collapsing (*themselves*), by suiciding, the towers had entered the game to complete the event.

In a way, it is the entire system that, by its internal fragility, helps the initial action. The more the system is globally concentrated to constitute ultimately only one network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point (already one little Filipino hacker has succeeded, with his laptop, to launch the I love you virus that wrecked entire networks). Here, eighteen (*dix-huit in the text*) kamikazes, through the absolute arm that is death multiplied by technological efficiency, start a global catastrophic process.

When the situation is thus monopolized by global power, when one deals with this formidable condensation of all functions through technocratic machinery and absolute ideological hegemony (*pensee unique*), what other way is there, than a terrorist reversal of the situation (*literally 'transfer of situation': am I too influenced by early translation as 'reversal'?*)? It is the system itself that has created the objective

conditions for this brutal distortion. By taking all the cards to itself, it forces the Other to change the rules of the game. And the new rules are ferocious, because the stakes are ferocious. To a system whose excess of power creates an unsolvable challenge, terrorists respond by a definitive act that is also unanswerable (*in the text: which cannot be part of the exchange circuit*). Terrorism is an act that reintroduces an irreducible singularity in a generalized exchange system. Any singularity (whether species, individual or culture), which has paid with its death for the setting up of a global circuit dominated by a single power, is avenged today by this terrorist situational transfer.

Terror against terror - there is no more ideology behind all that. We are now far from ideology and politics. No ideology, no cause, not even an Islamic cause, can account for the energy which feeds terror. It (*energy*) does not aim anymore to change the world, it aims (as any heresy in its time) to radicalize it through sacrifice, while the system aims to realize (*the world*) through force.

Terrorism, like virus, is everywhere. Immersed globally, terrorism, like the shadow of any system of domination, is ready everywhere to emerge as a double agent. There is no boundary to define it; it is in the very core of this culture that fights it - and the visible schism (and hatred) that opposes, on a global level, the exploited and the underdeveloped against the Western world, is secretly linked to the internal fracture of the dominant system. The latter can face any visible antagonism. But with terrorism - and its viral structure -, as if every domination apparatus were creating its own antibody, the chemistry of its own disappearance; against this almost automatic reversal of its own puissance, the system is powerless. And terrorism is the shockwave of this silent reversal.

Thus, it is no shock of civilizations, of religions, and it goes much beyond Islam and America, on which one attempts to focus the conflict to give the illusion of a visible conflict and of an attainable solution (through force). It certainly is a fundamental antagonism, but one which shows, through the spectrum of America (which maybe by itself the epicentre but not the embodiment of globalization) and through the spectrum of Islam (which is conversely not the embodiment of terrorism), triumphant globalization fighting with itself. In this way it is indeed a World War, not the third one, but the fourth and only truly World War, as it has as stakes globalization itself. The first two World Wars were classic wars. The first ended European supremacy and the colonial era. The second ended Nazism. The third, which did happen, as a dissuasive Cold War, ended communism. From one war to the other, one went further each time toward a unique world order. Today the latter, virtually accomplished, is confronted by antagonistic forces, diffused in the very heart of the global, in all its actual convulsions. Fractal war in which all cells, all singularities revolt as antibodies do. It is a conflict so unfathomable that, from time to time, one must preserve the idea of war through spectacular productions such as the Gulf (*production*) and today Afghanistan's. But the fourth World War is elsewhere. It is that which haunts every global order, every hegemonic domination; -if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would fight against it.

For it is the world itself which resists domination.

Terrorism is immoral. The event of the World Trade Center, this symbolic challenge is immoral, and it answers a globalization that is immoral. Then let us be immoral ourselves and, if we want to understand something, let us go somewhat beyond Good and Evil. As we have, for once, an event that challenges not only morals, but every interpretation, let us try to have the intelligence of Evil. The crucial point is precisely there: in this total counter-meaning to Good and Evil in Western philosophy, the philosophy of Enlightenment. We naively believe that the progress of the Good, its rise in all domains (sciences, techniques, democracy, human rights) correspond to a defeat of Evil. Nobody seems to understand that Good and Evil rise simultaneously, and in the same movement. The triumph of the One does not produce the erasure of the Other. Metaphysically, one considers Evil as an accident, but this axiom, embedded in all manichean fights of Good against Evil, is illusory. Good does not reduce Evil, nor vice-versa: there are both irreducible, and inextricable from each other. In fact, Good could defeat Evil only by renouncing itself, as by appropriating a global power monopoly, it creates a response of proportional violence.

In the traditional universe, there was still a balance of Good and Evil, according to a dialectical relation that more or less insured tension and equilibrium in the moral universe; - a little as in the Cold War, the face-to-face of the two powers insured an equilibrium of terror. Thus, there was no supremacy of one on the other. This symmetry is broken as soon as there is a total extrapolation of the Good (an hegemony of the positive over any form of negativity, an exclusion of death, of any potential adversarial force: the absolute triumph of the Good). From there, the equilibrium is broken, and it is as if Evil regained an invisible autonomy, developing then in exponential fashion.

Keeping everything in proportion, it is more or less what happened in the political order with the erasure of communism and the global triumph of liberal power: a fantastical enemy appeared, diffused over the whole planet, infiltrating everywhere as a virus, surging from every interstice of power. Islam. But Islam is only the moving front of the crystallization of this antagonism. This antagonism is everywhere and it is in each of us. Thus, terror against terror... But asymmetrical terror... And this asymmetry leaves the global superpower totally disarmed. Fighting itself, it can only founder in its own logic of power relations, without being able to play in the field of symbolic challenge and death, as it has eliminated the latter from its own culture.

Until now this integrating power had mostly succeeded to absorb every crisis, every negativity, creating therefore a deeply hopeless situation (not only for the damned of the earth, but for the rich and the privileged too, in their radical comfort). The fundamental event is that terrorists have finished with empty suicides; they now organize their own death in offensive and efficient ways, according to a strategic intuition, that is the intuition of the immense fragility of their adversary, this system reaching its quasi perfection and thus vulnerable to the least spark. They succeeded in making their own death the absolute arm against a system that feeds off the exclusion of death, whose ideal is that of zero death. Any

system of zero death is a zero sum system. And all the means of dissuasion and destruction are powerless against an enemy who has already made his death a counter-offensive. "What of American bombings! Our men want to die as much as Americans want to live!" This explains the asymmetry of 7,000 deaths in one blow against a system of zero death.

Therefore, here, death is the key (*to the game*)-- not only the brutal irruption of death in direct, in real time, but also the irruption of a more-than-real death: symbolic and sacrificial death - the absolute, no appeal event.

This is the spirit of terrorism.

Never is it to attack the system through power relations. This belongs to the revolutionary imaginary imposed by the system itself, which survives by ceaselessly bringing those who oppose it to fight in the domain of the real, which is always its own. But (*it*) moves the fight into the symbolic domain, where the rule is the rule of challenge, of reversal, of escalation. Thus, death can be answered only through an equal or superior death. (*Terrorism*) challenges the system by a gift that the latter can reciprocate only through its own death and its own collapse.

The terrorist hypothesis is that the system itself suicides in response to the multiple challenges of death and suicide. Neither the system, nor power, themselves escape symbolic obligation -and in this trap resides the only chance of their demise (*catastrophe*). In this vertiginous cycle of the impossible exchange of death, the terrorist death is an infinitesimal point that provokes a gigantic aspiration, void and convection. Around this minute point, the whole system of the real and power gains in density, freezes, compresses, and sinks in its own super-efficacy. The tactics of terrorism are to provoke an excess of reality and to make the system collapse under the weight of this excess. The very derision of the situation, as well as all the piled up violence of power, flips against it, for terrorist actions are both the magnifying mirror of the system's violence, and the model of a symbolic violence that it cannot access, the only violence it cannot exert: that of its own death.

This is why all this visible power cannot react against the minute, but symbolic death of a few individuals.

One must recognize the birth of a new terrorism, a new form of action that enters the game and appropriate its rules, the better to confuse it. Not only do these people not fight with equal arms, as they produce their own deaths, to which there is no possible response ("they are cowards"), but they appropriate all the arms of dominant power. Money and financial speculation, information technologies and aeronautics, the production of spectacle and media networks: they have assimilated all of modernity and globalization, while maintaining their aim to destroy it.

Most cunningly, they have even used the banality of American everyday life as a mask and double game. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying within families, before waking up suddenly like delayed explosive devices.

The perfect mastery of this secretiveness is almost as terrorist as the spectacular action of the 11 September. For it makes one suspect: any inoffensive individual can be a potential terrorist! If those terrorists could pass unnoticed, then anyone of us is an unnoticed criminal (each plane is suspect too), and ultimately, it might even be true. This might well correspond to an unconscious form of potential criminality, masked, carefully repressed, but always liable, if not to surge, at least to secretly vibrate with the spectacle of Evil. Thus, the event spreads out in its minutiae, the source of an even more subtle psychological (*mental*) terrorism.

The radical difference is that terrorists, while having at their disposal all the arms of the system, have also another fatal weapon: their own death.

If they limited themselves to fighting the system with its own weapons, they would be immediately eliminated. If they did not oppose the system with their own death, they would disappear as quickly as a useless sacrifice; this has almost always been the fate of terrorism until now (thus the Palestinian suicidal attacks) and the reason why it could not but fail.

Everything changed as soon as they allied all available modern means to this highly symbolic weapon. The latter infinitely multiplies their destructive potential. It is the multiplication of these two factors (which seem to us so irreconcilable) that gives them such superiority. Conversely, the strategy of zero death, of a technological, 'clean' war, precisely misses this transfiguration of 'real' power by symbolic power.

The prodigious success of such an attack poses a problem, and to understand it, one must tear oneself away from our Western perspective, to apprehend what happens in terrorists' minds and organization. Such efficacy, for us, would mean maximal calculation and rationality, something we have difficulties imagining in others. And even then, with us, there would always be, as in any rational organization or secret service, leaks and errors.

Thus, the secret of such success is elsewhere. The difference, with them, is that there is no work contract, but a pact and an obligation of sacrifice. Such obligation is secure from defection and corruption. The miracle is the adaptation to a global network, to technical protocols without any loss of this complicity for life and to the death. Contrary to the contract, the pact does not link individuals, -even their 'suicide' is not individual heroism, it is a collective, sacrificial act, sealed by demanding ideals (*I'm a bit free here but I feel it corresponds better to what is meant by 'exigence ideale'*). And it is the conjunction of these two mechanisms, born of an operational structure and of a symbolic pact, which makes possible such an excessive action.

We have no idea anymore of what is such a symbolic calculation, as in poker or potlatch, with minimal stakes and maximal result. That is, exactly what terrorists obtained in the attack on Manhattan, and which would be a good metaphor for chaos theory: an initial shock, provoking incalculable consequences, while American gigantic deployment ("Desert

Storm") obtained only derisory effects; - the storm ending so to speak in the flutter of butterfly wings.

Suicidal terrorism was the terrorism of the poor; this is the terrorism of the rich. And that is what specially frighten us: they have become rich (*they have every means*) without ceasing to want to eradicate us. Certainly, according to our value system, they cheat: staking (*gambling?*) one's own death is cheating. But they could not care less, and the new rules of the game are not ours.

We try everything to discredit their actions. Thus, we call them "suicidal" and "martyrs". To add immediately that such martyrdom does not prove anything, that it has nothing to do with truth and even (quoting Nietzsche) that it is the enemy of truth. Certainly, their death does not prove anything, but there is nothing to prove in a system where truth itself is elusive --or are we pretending to own it? Besides, such a moral argument can be reversed. If the voluntary martyrdom of the kamikazes proves nothing, then the involuntary martyrdom of the victims cannot prove anything either, and there is something obscene in making it a moral argument (the above is not to negate their suffering and their death).

Another bad faith argument: these terrorists exchange their death for a place in Paradise. Their act is not gratuitous, thus it is not authentic. It would be gratuitous only if they did not believe in God, if their death was without hope, as is ours (yet Christian martyrs assumed just such sublime exchange). Thus, again, they do not fight with equal weapons if they have the right to a salvation we can no longer hope for. We have to lose everything by our death while they can pledge it for the highest stakes.

Ultimately, all that - causes, proofs, truth, rewards, means and ends- belongs to typically Western calculation. We even put a value to death in terms of interest rates, and quality/price ratio. Such economic calculations are the calculation of those poor who no longer have even the courage to pay (*the price of death?*).

What can happen, - apart from war, which is no more than a conventional protection screen? We talk of bio-terrorism, bacteriological war or nuclear terrorism. But none of that belongs to the domain of symbolic challenge, rather it belongs to an annihilation without speech, without glory, without risk - that is, to the domain of the final solution.

And to see in terrorist action a purely destructive logic is nonsense. It seems to me that their own death is inseparable from their action (it is precisely what makes it a symbolic action), and not at all the impersonal elimination of the Other. Everything resides in the challenge and the duel, that is still in a personal, dual relation with the adversary. It is the power of the adversary that has humbled you, it is this power which must be humbled. And not simply exterminated... One must make (*the adversary*) lose face. And this cannot be obtained by pure force and by the suppression of the other. The latter must be aimed at, and hurt, as a personal adversary. Apart from the pact that links terrorists to each other, there is something like a dual pact with the adversary. It is then, exactly the opposite to the cowardice of which they are accused, and it is

exactly the opposite of what Americans do, for example in the Gulf War (and which they are doing again in Afghanistan): invisible target, operational elimination.

Of all these vicissitudes, we particularly remember seeing images. And we must keep this proliferation of images, and their fascination, for they constitute, willy nilly, our primitive scene. And the New York events have radicalized the relation of images to reality, in the same way as they have radicalized the global situation. While before we dealt with an unbroken abundance of banal images and an uninterrupted flow of spurious events, the terrorist attack in New York has resurrected both the image and the event.

Among the other weapons of the system which they have co-opted against it, terrorists have exploited the real time of images (*not clear here if it is real duration, real time or images in real time*), their instantaneous global diffusion. They have appropriated it in the same way as they have appropriated financial speculation, electronic information or air traffic. The role of images is highly ambiguous. For they capture the event (*take it as hostage*) at the same time as they glorify it. They can be infinitely multiplied, and at the same time act as a diversion and a neutralization (as happened for the events of May 68). One always forgets that when one speaks of the "danger" of the media. The image consumes the event, that is, it absorbs the latter and gives it back as consumer goods. Certainly the image gives to the event an unprecedented impact, but as an image-event.

What happens then to the real event, if everywhere the image, the fiction, the virtual, infuses reality? In this present case, one might perceive (maybe with a certain relief) a resurgence of the real, and of the violence of the real, in a supposedly virtual universe. "This is the end of all your virtual stories, - that is real!" Similarly, one could perceive a resurrection of history after its proclaimed death. But does reality really prevail over fiction? If it seems so, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become fiction itself. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image... It is as if they duel, to find which is the most unimaginable.

The collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. A surplus of violence is not enough to open up reality. For reality is a principle, and this principle is lost. Real and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination of the attack is foremost the fascination by the image (the consequences, whether catastrophic or leading to jubilation are themselves mostly imaginary).

It is therefore a case where the real is added to the image as a terror bonus, as yet another thrill. It is not only terrifying, it is even real. It is not the violence of the real that is first there, with the added thrill of the image; rather the image is there first, with the added thrill of the real. It is something like a prize fiction, a fiction beyond fiction. Ballard (after Borges) was thus speaking of reinventing the real as the ultimate, and most redoubtable, fiction.

This terrorist violence is not then reality backfiring, no more than it is history backfiring. This terrorist violence is not "real". It is worse in a way: it is symbolic. Violence in itself can be perfectly banal and innocuous. Only symbolic violence generates singularity. And in this singular event, in this disaster movie of Manhattan, the two elements that fascinate 20th century masses are joined: the white magic of movies and the black magic of terrorism.

One tries after the event to assign to the latter any meaning, to find any possible interpretation. But there is none possible, and it is only the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle that is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle. And against this immoral fascination (even if it engenders a universal moral reaction) the political order can do nothing. This is our theatre of cruelty, the only one left to us, -extraordinary because it unites the most spectacular to the most provocative. It is both the sublime micro-model of a nucleus of real violence with maximal resonance - thus the purest form of the spectacular, and the sacrificial model that opposes to historical and political order the purest symbolic form of challenge.

Any slaughter would be forgiven them if it had a meaning, if it could be interpreted as historical violence - this is the moral axiom of permissible violence. Any violence would be forgiven them if it were not broadcast by media ("Terrorism would be nothing without the media"). But all that is illusory. There is no good usage of the media, the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror and they are part of the game in one way or another.

Repressive actions travel the same unpredictable spiral as terrorist actions - none can know where it may stop, and what reversals may follow. At the level of the image and information, there are no possible distinctions between the spectacular and the symbolic, between "crime" and repression. And this uncontrollable unraveling of reversibility is the true victory of terrorism. It is a victory visible in the underground and extensive ramifications of the event - not only in direct, economic, political, market and financial recessions for the whole system, and in the moral and psychological regression that follows; but also in the regression of the value system, of all the ideology of freedom and free movement etc... that the Western world is so proud of, and that legitimates in its eyes its power over the rest of the world.

Already, the idea of freedom, a new and recent (*sic*) idea, is being erased from everyday lives and consciousness, and liberal globalization is being realized as its exact reverse: a 'Law and Order' globalization, a total control, a policing terror. Deregulation ends in maximal constraints and restrictions, equal to those in a fundamentalist society.

Production, consumption, speculation and growth slowdowns (but not of course corruption!): everything indicates a strategic retreat of the global system, a heart-rending revision of its values, a regulation forced by absolute disorder, but one the system imposes on itself, internalizing its own defeat. It seems a defensive reaction to terrorism impact, but it might in fact respond to secret injunctions.

Another side to terrorist victory is that all other forms of violence and destabilization of order favor it: Internet terrorism, biological terrorism, anthrax terrorism and the terrorism of the rumor, all are assigned to Ben Laden. He could even claim natural disasters. Every form of disorganization and perverse exchange benefits him. The structure of generalized global exchange itself favors impossible exchange. It is a form of terrorist automatic writing, constantly fed by the involuntary terrorism of the news. With all its consequent panics: if, in that anthrax story, intoxication happens by itself, by instantaneous crystallization, like a chemical solution reacting to the contact of a molecule, it is because the system has reached the critical mass that makes it vulnerable to any aggression.

There is no solution to this extreme situation, especially not war that offers only an experience of *deja-vu*, with the same flooding of military forces, fantastic news, useless propaganda, deceitful and pathetic discourses and technological deployment. In other words, as in the Gulf War, a non-event, an event that did not happen...

There is its *raison d'etre*: to substitute to a real and formidable, unique and unforeseeable event, a repetitive and *deja-vu* pseudo-event. The terrorist attack corresponded to a primacy of the event over every model of interpretation. Conversely, this stupidly military and technological war corresponds to a primacy of the model over the event, that is to fictitious stakes and to a *non-sequitur*. War extends/continues the absence at the heart of politics through other means.

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