Journal of American Studies of Turkey
14 (2001) : 15-24

Rhetoric and/as Terrorism: Notes on September 11

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Rhetoric: event horizon

This essay is based on a paper I gave at a workshop on "Rhetoric and/as Terrorism: Before and After September 11." Our panel of participants included: Ferhat Boratav, journalist and Editor-in-Chief of CNN Turk; Oral Çalışlar, columnist at *Cumhuriyet*; Yusuf Eradam, professor at Ankara University and Chair of the Department of American Culture and Literature; Banu Güven, editor, reporter, and presenter of the night news at NTV; Bennett Lowenthal, Assistant Public Affairs Officer, Consulate General of the United States; and Mahmut Mutman, professor at Bilkent University and Chair of the Department of Communication and Design.

The event itself. I want to start by suggesting that there are at least two ways to define rhetoric (which brings us to the first of many distinctions or boundaries we will be encountering). (1) For the first, one might begin by imagining a very different workshop, a kind of parallel workshop, one devoted to the *event itself*. Here, too, we come to a *boundary*: that which separates the event itself from *everything else*; everything else being *the rhetorical*. This is rhetoric as the realm of representation, or recollection: that which is supposed to interpose or mediate between us and the event itself. But what is, we might ask, the event itself? We only apprehend it, after all, through images, words, analyses. Indeed, in the case of September 11, the event itself was designed *as* a media event, an event of rhetorical dimensions. Which is not to say that such an event does not have very real consequences.

We tend to forget, in other words, that *rhetoric itself is an event*; that *rhetoric is real*. Which brings us to (2) rhetoric in its classical, most traditional sense: that of language as persuasion; language, that is, as action, the sign as an instrument of force: what we might call (borrowing a term from the anthrax scare) the *weaponized signifier*.[1]

Negative dialectics. Why is this important? Let me answer that by way of two citations. The first from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*: "[I]f negative dialectics," Adorno writes, "calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true… it must also be a thinking against itself… If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims" (365). Adorno's project: how to rehabilitate philosophy, language – the whole conceptual legacy of the Enlightenment – after the horrors of the Holocaust. Compare this to book 10 of the *Republic* where Plato argues, by way of Socrates, that poetry is far too dangerous a force to leave unguarded in the perfect polis: "so

long as she is unable to make good her defense we shall chant over to ourselves as we listen the reasons that we have given as a countercharm to her spell" (608b). Plato's defense against language is, as it is for Adorno, ultimately, more language: his poison and his antidote are made of one and the same thing.

That, too, is our quandary: language is the problem, and language may be the only remedy. Otherwise why are we here, talking with each other?

Rhetorical terrorism: viral languages

Rhetorical terrorism. The US military is rather fond of its *smart bombs*, laser-guided missiles that home in on targets, distinguishing, when all goes well, between friend and foe. We are asked to imagine, in effect, there is such a thing as a "moral" weapon. What is repugnant, on the other hand, in the tactics of terrorists, we are told, is that *they fail to make distinctions*. It is ironic, then, to find that much of the language in the wake of September 11 precisely mirrors the violence that prompted it in the first place, is the discursive equivalent of the very menace it seeks to demonize: for it is, above all, *language that fails to make distinctions*; or, *which fails to mark boundaries*. Such language is, I would say, a form of *rhetorical terrorism*. Language as an instrument of fear, not communication, language designed precisely *not to communicate clearly*. The tropes/troops[2] that constitute a veritable rhetorical arsenal work by making the enemy not more but *less* specific.[3]

Rhetorical strategies for diffusing boundaries. Allegory. Many of Bush's most notorious phrases - "axis of evil," for example - follow this obfuscatory and abstracting logic. The effect is to convert a complicated narrative into something like medieval allegory: a simple and transcendent struggle between Good and Evil. *Prosopopoeia*. Central to this pseudo-medieval discourse, we can see, is the trope of personification or *prosopopeia* (from the Greek *prosopon*, "face").[4] The now almost universal use of "terror" – or, rather, "Terror," instead of "terrorism," is the classic example. (CNN, October 18, 2002: "The Changing Face of Terror").[5] On other occasions it is precisely because *terrorism has no face* – terrorists *hide in the shadows*, they *hunker down in caves* – that it is so terrifying.

Manichaeism. Meanwhile, abstractions are most effectively organized into antitheses; our understanding of terrorism tends to be viewed through the lens of a neo-Manichaeism, as in Huntington's "clash of civilizations." Bush's rhetoric is Manichaean through and through. Now take this allegorical-rhetorical mode, transplant it to Texas, and the result is the *Western* (from where Reagan, too, borrowed much of his language), no doubt Bush's favorite rhetorical register, what we might call *the discourse of the bad guy*. All of these rhetorical strategies are evident, for example, in a speech Bush makes on 10 October 2001: "Terrorists try to operate in the shadows, they try to hide; but we're going to shine the light of justice on them"; "The men on the wall there… have put themselves on that list because of great acts of evil"; they are "evil-doers" ("President Unveils 'Most Wanted' Terrorist List," U. S. Department of State International Information Programs: Washington File at http://usinfo.state.gov/).

Rhetoric of paranoia: the terror of tautology. Listening to Bush, it becomes easier to see how this discourse aims not to clarify but to cloud, not to dispel fear but to magnify it. The use of abstractions like *Terror* facilitates the linking of what may appear to be unrelated issues. The result is a language of *paranoia*. Rhetorical terms can thus function like imagistic nets, encompassing and linking the seemingly distant and disparate: "There is a connection between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, "Bush declares on October 14, 2002: "Iraq is part of the war on terror. And he must disarm" ("Disarming Iraq is Part of War on Terror, Bush Says"). There are various ways to widen the net: above all, through a kind of numbing

repetition, in which definition becomes pure *tautology* (*terrorism = terrorism*). [6] Bush's demonization of terrorists, calling them "sick" or "evil" or "cold-blooded killers," represents, in fact, a reversal of the traditional definition of the terrorist: it suggests that terrorists are sadistic and amoral, in the same category as serial killers; they kill for pleasure, not ideology. In the past terrorists had always been defined as those who killed precisely in pursuit of an ideology – however heinous. Elsewhere that continues to remain, apparently, Bush's understanding of the terrorists; as when he identifies terrorists as "people who hate freedom." But for Bush, ultimately, *terrorism* is a null set that can be filled with anything one wants.[7]

Ice-nine. I call this kind of language, *viral discourse*. It operates through the *logic of contagion and crystallization*, like Kurt Vonnegut's *ice-nine* in his novel *Cat's Cradle*, a substance which instantly turns water into ice. Nothing escapes the force of this rhetorical virus: it can potentially affect and infect everyone - like terrorism itself.[8] Note, then, that while at every moment appealing to a reassuring landscape of fixed borders and immutable distinctions, it ultimately operates through their erasure. We owe it to ourselves, I think, to keep a few *distinctions*or *boundaries* in mind – whether to uphold them or to dismantle them - as a kind of *antidote* to this kind of *viral discourse*. [9]

***Rhetoricians*. All the more reason, then, why it might be important to hear from those in the business of making, or breaking, distinctions. All of us gathered at this workshop were, in one way or another, trained to do precisely that – were experts on, or, purveyors of, rhetoric, whether as academics, diplomats, or journalists. As a member of the first group, I was especially interested in the way a number of prominent intellectuals and artists treated what happened on 9/11 as a *border event*: an event that can only be understood by relying on or resisting certain boundaries or distinctions.**

Presence/absence: agoraphobias at ground zero

Present in absentia. Watching movies about NY is different after 9/11. How many of us have caught ourselves playing a new and perverse game: find the Twin Towers. Now you see it, now you don't. My brother, who has a terrible sense of direction, lamented, after the event: "Now that they're gone, how do I know where I am?" Spike Lee's *25th Hour* is the first major American film that treated the empty space where the Twin Towers used to be. Lee returns again and again to the motif of disappearance: in shots of the devastated New York skyline, in recurrent images of the mop-up operations at ground zero (while Levantine music, interestingly enough, plays in the background). The Twin Towers, one might argue, are the main character(s) of the film, haunting it like a ghost, present in absentia.[10] The destruction of the WTC was, then, an act of an erasure, an act that can only succeed through its failure; for, as in Derrida's notion of the sign as a trace, the *erasure* is the *presence of an absence*.

The ruin. There is a reason why the terrorists chose a building, and this one in particular, as their target. For architecture, especially great architecture, is that which proves a before and an after. (The ruin: what or where a building *used* to be.)[11]

Agoraphobic cultures. And now we are to have a new building, where the old one used to be. There is a very American logic at work here, and, indeed, a very New York logic as well: for both are *agoraphobic cultures*, driven by the fear of empty space (hence the totemic force of the very words *ground zero*). More precisely: these are cultures in love with the idea of space as something to be occupied. In *akraphilic* New York, of course, this kind of

mythology of manifest destiny becomes a vertical phenomenon. Knock it down; we'll build another one, only taller.[12] This is precisely the logic bin Laden was counting on (just as he was counting on Afghanistan and Iraq).[13]

Before/After: amnesias and catastrophes at ground zero

Rupture. The border between presence and absence is also, of course, a temporal one. For many, the destruction of the Twin Towers was a kind of rupture with history, dividing it into a before and an after.

The end of amnesia? America, it is often said, is a country without history, a place without memory. That is, of course, in a very obvious sense, untrue; but it remains a powerful myth or rhetorical trope. 9/11 then would be the *end of amnesia*: not just an emergency call, but also a wake-up call for America: America's transforming trauma, its loss of innocence. "Things," we are told, "will never be the same after 9/11." And yet in the American response to the events of 9/11 – build and bomb, or rather, rebuild and rebomb – we watch the mythology of amnesia reassert itself. Hence the efficiency of the mop-up at ground zero; the pride New York took in *showing the world just how quickly it got back up on its feet again*. It would appear that things will indeed very much continue to be *business as usual*. This is, in a way, a more chilling erasure of history than the destruction of the Twin Towers; so that, ironically, we can now watch New Yorkers finishing the business bin Laden began.

The truth of this is revealed in the speed with which Libeskind's ideal vision of the new building at ground zero has responded to the more pragmatic demands of commerce and transportation. The "Summary Report on the Selected Design for the WTC Site" (*LowerManhattan.info* at http://www.lowermanh…build) reflects a vast array of transportation and commercial needs, needs that have already forced modifications in the original plan. An open space that was originally intended to go down 70 feet, offering visitors a view of the first WTC's bedrock foundation, has been scaled back to 30 feet, "responding," the report informs us, "to the needs of transportation infrastructure."

On the one hand, the void, the trace, the footprint, the memory present in absentia; on the other hand, the world's tallest building: the logic of erasure, replacement, amnesia. The plan that was competing with Libeskind, by THINK, was rejected because it gestured too explicitly at the original WTC. Roland Betts, a development corporation board member, admitted that for many, "they were skeletons of the original building…. Instead of being inspirational, they were constant reminders of the attack" (Hirschkorn, "Architect Defines WTC plans in patriotic terms," *CNN.com*, February 28, 2003, at http://www.cnn.com). What is important instead is that "[m]oving forward on filling the hole in Manhattan's skyline will help salve a psychic wound." But what if such wounds are better left to fester?

In the new cite we see at once the sanctity of the void, and the panicked rush to fill it. "Libeskind," Hirschkorn tells us, "does leave untouched the acre-wide footprints where the 110-story twin towers stood"; and the buildings are designed so that a shaft of light traces a path for visitors, every year, at the precise moments when the planes struck. Charisse Jones and Maria Puente, writing in *USA Today* (June 13, 2003) write that "officials announced that they would fill the void left by the fallen WTC with a sky-piercing spire that would be the tallest building in the world, a complex of sharply geometrical buildings, with a memorial plaza exposing the pit where the twin towers once stood."

Catastrophe theory. Many critics have challenged this notion of history as a rupture between the *pre-* and the *post-*. For Chomsky, we are absurdly shortsighted, with conveniently short memories (remember the first attempt to blow up the WTC, in 1993? No?); otherwise we would see all this as a drearily familiar event. But even Chomsky agrees with

more *apocalyptic critics*, such as Baudrillard and Virilio, who tend to portray 9/11 as a literal *catastrophe* (from the Greek *kata* + *strophe*, a *downward turn*): that is to say, a *system failure*. And their analyses of 9/11 are *catastrophe theories* in an almost mathematical sense, so that the event has its analogy in natural phenomena – boiling, fission, stampeding, panic – where matter shifts precipitously from one state to another. Note that because such an event destroys or alters the very system which produced it in the first place, the catastrophe, therefore, cannot be said to be a rupture with that system: it neither precedes it nor follows it. For none of these critics, then, can 9/11 be called a *singular event*: for all of them, what makes it special is what is says about the *system*.

After Auschwitz. Others, certainly, have treated 9/11 as something transcendent or singular. One might compare the disagreement here to the debate over the singularity of the Holocaust. And it seems right to return to Adorno at this point and his famous statement, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." (Which is, of course, not the same thing as saying that one shouldn't write it.)[14]

Note that what has been consistently stressed in the media reportage on Daniel Libeskind is his links – both biographical and architectural – to the Holocaust. Hirschkorn writes at *CNN.com* that Libeskind "immigrated with his parents, both Holocaust survivors, in 1959," and that he will go on to become the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Event/representation: the realm of real spectacles

From Auschwitz to Hiroshima. The comparison, I think, is misguided; there are simply too many crucial differences. For the death-camps were less an event than a arrangement of many events; in effect, an entire culture (a nightmarish one, like Homer's Hades or Dante's Inferno) – and, significantly, a covert one, hidden from view. Hiroshima, on the other hand, is perhaps a better analogy (although the proponents of singularity would suggest that all analogies are doomed to fail): the very model of the event as cataclysm and spectacle.

The terrorism of spectacle. The destruction of the WTC was not something that simply happened: it was something we *watched* happening. The terrorists, of course, were counting on that. The *spectacle of terrorism* proves, Baudrillard argues in *The Spirit of Terrorism* and *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, the *terrorism of spectacle*. We live in a world of spectacle, a world dominated by images.[15] For Virilio, too, in *Ground Zero*, culture itself has increasingly become a totalitarianism of the image (26). (Virilio asks us to consider the global reach of media conglomerates, or Berlusconi's government of *telecracy* [30].)[16]

Art. In its sheer power as an image, the fall of the Twin Towers would seem to offer us the modern paradigm of the sublime. Many were outraged at Stockhausen's now infamous remark, cited by Virilio in *Ground Zero* (45): "What we have witnessed is the greatest work of art there has ever been!" [*das grösste Kunstwerk, das es je gegeben hat*]. But Stockhausen may have been referring to the unfathomability of the sublime: the power of the image as something incomprehensible, overwhelming.

Accident. In this sublime catastrophe, *the attack*, in Virilio's terms, *becomes accident* (*Ground Zero*). Our century, for Virilio, has thus moved past different "horizons of expectations": from The Great Revolution, to The Great War, to The Great Accident (*Crepuscular Dawn* 176-177). Consider the universal response before the advent of the

2nd plane: "I thought it was an accident."[17] This was, of course, no accident, but it was certainly designed to look like one. See Virilio in *Crepuscular Dawn* on the "logic of the accident" (148), and the "Accident-Weapon" (172).

Us/them: no more fronts

Event as suicide. For most of the critics I have cited, 9/11 was, I have suggested, an example of system failure on a massive scale. And in a world where the system is as hegemonic as ours, *the accident* may be the only remaining mode of resistance. Many critics have suggested that in 9/11 we are witness, then, not to a battle *between* forces, even less a *clash* of civilizations: but an attack on globalization - one, ironically enough, produced by globalization itself. 9/11, in this sense, is a *suicide*.[18] Virilio in *Crepuscular Dawn*: "September 11 opened Pandora's Box. In this new situation, New York is what Sarajevo was. Sarajevo triggered the First World War. New York is the attack in the first war of globalization. An internecine war, a civil war" (178). For the first time, a war without a *front*.

Terror against terror. This is Baudrillard's perspective, too, already announced, prophetically, in *Simulations* (1983). "Why," Baudrillard asks, "are there two towers at New York's World Trade Center?" (135). "The fact that there are two of them signifies the end of all competition, the end of all original reference" (136) – the triumph, that is, of global capitalism. Any such monolithic totalitarianism, no matter how benevolent, Baudrillard warns us, will generate resistance. [19] The destruction of the Twin Towers, as for Virilio, is therefore a systemic suicide: "one had the impression that they were committing suicide in response to the suicide of the suicide planes." "Terror," in another of these Baudrillardian formulations, is "terror against terror."

Could the real demon be *sameness*? Žižek wonders, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* if the goal of "today's fundamentalist terror" is "to awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our everyday ideological universe" (9). And the irony of this, in a return to the theme of the essentially rhetorical or mediated nature of the event, is that this "passion for the Real," as Žižek calls it, "culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle" (9). This *passion for the Real*, a term Žižek borrows from Alain Badiou's *Le Siècle*, is indeed, Žižek suggests, *the* distinctive feature of the twentieth-century. And it brings us back, ominously, to Adorno's repudiation of the semiotic realm – language, rhetoric, the concept itself – as that which has failed to prevent, or worse, given birth to, the Holocaust. The death camps: not the banality of evil, not the real; rather, the "Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality" (5-6).

Viral terrorism. Globalization, for these critics, is itself a form of terror, incubating its own destruction from without and within. We are all terrorists, in the end. There is no clash here, no border between us and them (on that point, Chomsky and Baudrillard are in agreement). Hence the rhetoric of "exorcism": a moral purging – precisely because terrorism is anywhere and everywhere. There is a "terroristic imagination," Baudrillard suggests, in all of us. Baudrillard expands this notion into a national death-drive: "They did it; but we wished for it." (We may recall here the way the terrorists inoculated themselves into American culture: they lived like us, they looked like us; they could be any of us!) Hence the deployment, again, of a *viral rhetoric*. Terrorism, in the national imagination, is thus not a

rogue cancer, a gangrenous limb, an allegorical clash between good and evil, men in white hats and men in black hats, bodies and anti-bodies: rather, *terrorism is a virus*.

Conclusion: Two events, or one?

The uncanny. Future project: compare the Twin Towers to the twin ghosts that appear in Kubrick's *The Shining*. The horror of replication, and the loss of reference. Two towers, two planes; two events? A matter for insurance companies to decide.

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[1] Chomksy's "manufacturing consent," for example (see Chomsky and Herman 1988, although the term was in use long before Chomsky) is in essence the notion of rhetoric.

[2] I borrow the pun from Avital Ronell's essay "Support our Tropes: Reading Desert Storm."

[3] Compare Slavov Žižek's comments in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*: "all the main terms we use to designate the present conflict – 'war on terrorism,' 'democracy and freedom,' 'human rights,' and so on – are false terms, mystifying our perception of the situation instead of allowing us to think it" (2).

[4] As in the medieval morality play, where Virtue, for example, does battle with Vice.

[5] Chomsky notes in *Reflections on 9-11*: "It is much easier to personalize the enemy, identified as the symbol of ultimate evil, than to seek to understand what lies behind major atrocities" (37).

[6] The force of this rhetorical net becomes evident in Bush's response to a journalist's question as to whether or not the sniper attacks in the D.C. area can be considered terrorist attacks: "First of all, it is a form of terrorism, but in terms of the terrorism that we think of, we have no evidence one way or the other, obviously. But anytime anybody is randomly shooting, randomly killing, randomly taking life, it's cold-blooded murder and it's – it's a sick mind who loves terrorizing society" ("Remarks by the President Upon Departure for Michigan," October 14, 2002).

[7] "I understand," says Chomsky, the term 'terrorism' exactly in the sense defined in official U.S. documents: "the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature. This is done though intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear." That is its "literal meaning" (and by that definition, Chomsky notes, the U.S. regularly practices terrorism); but in its standard "propagandistic usage," "the term 'terrorism' is used to refer to terrorist acts committed by enemies against us or our allies" (89-90).

[8] Consider the program aired by CNN on June 14, 2001: "Seeds of Terror," investigating the organization of terrorist groups into "sleeper cells." "There is," Jean Baudrillard suggests in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, hardly a friend of George Bush, "a terroristic imagination" in all of us (5). But in a way that is precisely Bush's conviction. For the American political establisment and the media alike, terrorism operates virally.

[9] Naturally the same scrutiny ought to be directed at the rhetorical strategies of political or religious discourse in the Middle East. See, for example, Farish A. Noor's "The Evolution of 'Jihad' in Islamist Political Discourse: How a Plastic Concept Became Harder."

[10] In *Requiem for the Twin Towers* Baudrillard notes: "although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence." (52).

[11] These buildings were, for the terrorists, Baudrillard points out, *worth destroying* (50). *Why* did Al Qaeda target a building? Globalization, Baudrillard argues, in *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, is also architectural. For Buadrillard, the horror of their destruction can only be compared to the horror of living and working in them.

[12] One might compare Berlin to New York here; specifically, the ruins of Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church on Kurfurstendam, to the new WTC at ground zero.

[13]Daniel Libeskind's plan for a new commercial and cultural center at ground zero, selected after a long competition, clearly demonstrates this agoraphobic logic, a logic that suggests another form of repetition-compulsion. The plan is everywhere vexed by a contradictory and agoraphobic logic, by the demands of remembering and forgetting, memorialization and money. See "New World Trade Center Designs," *LowerManhattan.info* at http://www.lowermanh…build.

[14] Adorno also writes: "After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims" (361); and "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living" (362-63).

[15] In the first version of "The Spirit of Terrorism" which appeared as an article in *Le Monde*"on November 11, 2001, Baudrillard writes: "The fascination is first that of the image… In this case, then, the real is added to the image as a plus of terror, as an extra frisson. Not only is it terrifying but, what's more, it's real."

[16] For Virilio, history itself in *Crepuscular Dawn* is narrated as a progressive effacement of the body as we move towards an *imaginary body*: a collective suicide. Reflected in Nazi eugenics, in Hollywood fantasies of the triumph of the machine (*Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, *Matrix*), fashion as the mutilation of the body (piercing, tattooing), in body art (Orlan, 118), in an entire culture of *biopolitik*. The body is now replaced by "simulators of proximity" that offer the "imposture of immediacy."

[17] What Virilio calls the *accident*, Baudrillard calls the *pure* or the *absolute event*. There is no specific meaning in the event, no ideology (Islam is a convenient vehicle): this is terror against terror (the monopoly of the good; the good as any monolithic ideology). And therefore, the *pure event* is a *symbolic event*, a *sacrificial event*. Such events are outmoded, prohibited, obsolete in our global culture: progress has outlawed them.

[18] Such an argument, for Chomsky, is another convenient way of avoiding responsibility for American actions. But if for Chomsky 9/11 is neither apocalyptic, nor singular, it nevertheless has its origins, ultimately, in American actions, and therefore obeys, as Virilio and others suggest it does, a kind of reciprocal or suicidal logic. It depends, in the end, on how close we are to the event: the farther we pull back, the larger and more diffuse the event itself.

[19] For "any unitary system," Baudrillard argues, "if it wishes to survive, must acquire a binary regulation. You need two superpowers to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble of itself. And the equilibrium of terror alone can allow a regulated opposition to be established, for the strategy is structural, never atomic." (From *Simulations*, written in 1984).