

Review Essay

September 11, In Theory

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Of the many rumors that spread like viruses after the September 11 attacks, perhaps the most emblematic was the suggestion that, visible in the smoke billowing from the World Trade Center – and photographed by both the AP and CNN – was the face of Satan. No other rumor was as audacious, as improbable, as flat-out bizarre; yet no other rumor so neatly incorporated as many of the themes evident in the post-9/11 Internet-driven circulation of pseudo-information. Like the story that CNN had falsified its footage of celebrating Palestinians or the widely-circulated “snapshot” of a tourist on the WTC observation deck as the tower is about to be hit by a plane, Satan’s Face turned on the reliability of photographic evidence. Like the supposedly prophetic quatrain in which Nostradamus had predicted the attacks or the story that a miraculously unburned bible had been found in the charred wreckage of the Pentagon, Satan’s Face placed the supernatural at the heart of an event otherwise characterized by emblems of secular modernity (planes, skyscrapers, cell phones, etc.). And like the claims that 4,000 Israelis working in the WTC had been ordered to stay home on the day of the attacks or that there was no actual evidence of an airliner found at the site of the Pentagon crash, Satan’s Face suggested that there was far more to the attacks than could be rationally explained by an objective analysis of the facts at hand.

The rumor of Satan’s Face, however, went all these others one better, in that it was not demonstrably false, or even falsifiable. In each of the images in question, several dark spots in the billowing smoke are indeed positioned in such a way as to give the uncanny impression of a human face. The “faces” produced, however, are understandably abstract, even cartoonish, and surely do not cohere into a single, recognizable visage (to my eye, one resembles Batman’s nemesis The Joker while the other looks vaguely like Richard Nixon). It is little wonder, of course, that many people chose to interpret these insubstantial, coincidental shapes as the devil; if the horror of the day did not put one in mind of the Prince of Darkness, President Bush’s address to the nation the evening of the attacks, in which he used the word “evil” four times in a scant 600-word statement, surely might. Thus, unlike most of the rumors above (though similar to the Nostradamus prophesy), the question of Satan’s Face is not a question of fact but of interpretation; what emerged from the billowing smoke was not a

clear image, but a hazy caricature that was interpreted to fit an already-determined sense of the meaning of September 11.

In this Rorschach-test quality, the rumor of Satan's Face provides an apt metaphor for various interpretations of September 11, both those that were offered in the heat of the moment and those that emerged later. Thus, the attacks were, for evangelical preachers Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, another opportunity to condemn secularists, feminists, and homosexuals; for right-wing pundit Ann Coulter, another chance to castigate liberal politicians in general and Congress (at that point still controlled by Democrats) in particular; for left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore, another chance to cast aspersions on the Bush presidency. In a more scholarly vein, Bernard Lewis saw the events as the logical extension of themes he had been exploring in his own work for decades; Noam Chomsky saw the same with regard to his very, very different work. In spite of all of the rhetoric that, on September 11, the world had changed, political and intellectual understandings of the world seemed not so much to change as to ossify (except in the case of Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis, which became the first intellectual casualty in the War on Terror).

Given this general situation, it would certainly be satisfying to report that Verso's series of monographs – published on the first anniversary of the attacks and containing “analyses of the United States, the media, and events surrounding September 11 by Europe's most stimulating and provocative philosophers” – offered insight into the larger meaning of September 11 and the largest and most difficult issues that stem from the events of that day. Alas, that is not entirely the case. Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, Paul Virilio's *Ground Zero*, and Slavoj Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* use the events of September 11 to initiate quite similar discussions of globalization, totalizing systems, and the nature of the Real; the same details and observations – that warfare no longer involves face-to-face combatants, that the collapse of the Twin Towers had been presaged by countless movies that packaged such events as entertainment, that the symbols of modernity were attacked and brought down via other symbols of modernity, etc. – recur in each book. Yet Baudrillard and Virilio merely use September 11 as another occasion to rehash ideas they have been expressing for some time now (particularly the prolific Baudrillard). Only Žižek actually provides a critical understanding of the events of September 11 in their specificity.

Baudrillard has presented the slimmest offering in the series: a “book” consisting of two essays, the latter repetitive of the former in spite of there being fewer than 8,000 words between them. For Baudrillard, as one might expect, the chief significance of the attack on the World Trade Center is symbolic; until September 11, there had been no “symbolic events on a world scale – that is to say not just events that gain worldwide coverage, but events that represent a setback for globalization itself.” Proceeding from this suggestion, his analysis follows in the vein of his earlier *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, though tempered by an acknowledgement that, this time, events do have a dimension that could be regarded as “real”; nevertheless, he argues, reality only *seems* to have disrupted our simulated existence, because “it has absorbed fiction's energy, and has itself become fiction.” One might reasonably expect an analysis to follow on this point, and even eagerly await it; after all, those of us who watched the live coverage of the attacks heard eyewitnesses again and again compare the

horror all around them to a movie, a phenomenon that fairly cries out for a Baudrillardian analysis. But that is not what follows; instead, he suggests that “we might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image. . . . It is a kind of duel between them, a kind of contest to see which can be the most unimaginable” (ellipsis in original). Since, at a different point, Baudrillard characterizes the terrorists’ tactics as designed “to bring about an excess of reality,” one could be forgiven for concluding the target of the attacks were fiction and the image. But this does not seem to be the case since, at various other points we learn that the target was “the system,” “globalization,” and/or “global economic liberalism.” Does this then mean that these things are themselves merely images and fictions? This, I suppose, is news, as is the even more surprising news that the Twin Towers were not destroyed from without but apparently committed suicide – that “the towers, tired of being a symbol which was too heavy to bear, collapsed, this time physically, in their totality.” (48) Baudrillard, of course, is well-known for provocative, aphoristic pronouncements such as these, but in the past he has had the good grace to surround them with an argument. Here, instead, there is merely the piling up of provocations toward no supportable, let alone original, point. It works; one is provoked. When he suggests that “In terms of collective drama, one can say that the horror of the 4,000 victims dying in those towers was inseparable from the horror of living in them – the horror of living and working in sarcophagi of concrete and steel,” one hears Dorothy Parker afresh: “This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.” If only it had the excuse of being a novel. Instead, one also hears Baudrillard at the opening of the book: “The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time.” One cannot but agree – and hope, especially if one respects Baudrillard’s earlier works, that this time he simply failed to take his own advice.

Virilio’s entry in the series, *Ground Zero* provides a more cogent and coherent argument than does Baudrillard’s. Here he extends his arguments developed in his earlier works regarding technology and the human condition, and specifically his interrogation of the notion of Progress. For Virilio, Progress – by which he means largely, though not exclusively, scientific/technological progress – is a destructive or, more accurately, self-destructive force. Unbridled technological change, he argues, has created a “global suicide state,” in which nothing is prohibited (except prohibition itself); the result is the destruction of, among other things, the distinctions between adulthood and childhood, between science and religion, between the real and the simulated. Virilio explores these themes on a whirlwind tour of modernity that takes in not only September 11, but also Kosovo, the suicides of the Heaven’s Gate cult, the indoctrination of the Hitler Youth, the rise of tabloid journalism and the culture of celebrity, Andy Warhol, Berthold Brecht, Pablo Picasso, Silvio Berlusconi, James Baldwin, Josef Goebbels, Sts. Thomas More and Augustine. It’s a heady mixture that allows him to make his case through the sheer accumulation of observations. It is not, however, a work which offers a particular analysis of the September 11 attacks; what it offers instead is an illustration that Virilio’s general system of thought can accommodate unproblematically the events of September 11. As such, it is both a useful introduction to Virilio and an interesting, if minor, addition to his body of work. It is not, however, a work that illuminates September 11 in any sustained sense, and should not be mistaken for one.

It is, ironically, Slavoj Žižek whose entry in this series provides an analysis of September 11 that is complex, original, and truly provocative – “ironically” because Žižek is less frequently associated with social theory and criticism than is either Baudrillard or Virilio, though his recent work has moved decidedly in this direction. Comprised of five separate but related essays, *Žižek's Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* it is noteworthy – and praiseworthy – for two tendencies it exhibits that the other entries in this series do not. First, Žižek is alone in taking on the September 11 attacks (and related events such as the bombing of Afghanistan) in their specificity. Where Baudrillard and Virilio have written books that outline theoretical positions and that appropriate (and occasionally misappropriate) aspects of September 11 to support their worldviews, Žižek is indeed primarily concerned with making sense of the attacks and their aftermath. This is not to suggest, of course, that his analysis is atheoretical; he draws not only on Lacan but also Nietzsche and Hegel, among others, in developing his arguments. But Žižek is alone of the three authors in confronting theory with what film historian Tom Gunning has called “the scandal of the actual”; the result is a theoretically informed reading of contemporary events, rather than a processing of contemporary events through a Theory Machine in order to yield yet more theory. In this reading, Žižek draws on contemporary events themselves as well as philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and American film in order to develop his main themes. He suggests that we cannot simply assert the absence of the Real (à la Baudrillard), nor can we take the WTC attacks as unambiguously Real; instead, he suggests that *The Matrix* (the source of his title) provides a useful template for thinking about contemporary existence, with the globe divided between an increasingly virtual First World of consumer-driven hedonism and a real Third World of violence and death. In this context, the attack on the Twin Towers and its aftermath was neither virtual nor real, but instead confronted Americans with a Desert of the Real: a “derealization” of horror in which, “while the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce some gruesome detail” (ellipsis in original). That this is followed by the attack on Afghanistan and the anthrax scare -- “a superpower bombing a desolate desert country and, at the same time, hostage to invisible bacteria” -- only further cements the point. It is also illustrative of the second tendency evident in Žižek but missing in Baudrillard and Virilio: the willingness to utilize neither a totalizing system nor a simplistic dichotomy as a means of understanding these events, but instead an active resistance to both those tendencies in favor of perceiving and interrogating the fractures, borders, and fault lines in such explanations. Žižek is alone in this series in critiquing both Western capitalism and Islamic fundamentalism, both the Right-Wing and Left-Wing responses to the attacks in the US, both American and European responses to the attacks and to terror in general. As such, he is alone in advancing, rather than obscuring, our understanding of what the world was before September 11, and what it has become since. It is a valuable contribution, one which allows us to gaze upon the smoke rising above Manhattan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere and see something other than what we have been led to expect.

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*. London: Verso, 2002.

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