

8 The Question of Evidence

The Power of Rhetoric and the Documentary

All discourses, including documentary film, seek to externalize evidence—to place it referentially outside the domain of the discourse itself, which then gestures to its location there, beyond and before interpretation. It's like fly-fishing, where an artificial fly is cast into the water, where it will then appear as a natural part of the environment, luring a fish, which mistakes the fabricated for the authentic—to its eternal regret—to bite.

Granting evidence an external authenticity beyond that bestowed by the discourse itself makes its visibility appear a fact rather than an invention. Evidence does indeed refer to a fact, object, or situation—something two or more people agree on, something verifiable and concrete—but facts and events only acquire the distinctive status of evidence within a discursive or interpretive frame. Evidence, then, is that part of discourse, be it rational-philosophic, poetic-narrative, or rhetorical, that is charged with a double existence: it is part of the discursive chain but also gives the vivid impression of residing external to it. In other words facts become evidence when they are taken up in a discourse, and that discourse gains the force to compel belief through its capacity to refer evidence to a domain outside itself. This is what makes the creation of credible evidence like fly-fishing, or ventriloquism, performed, in the case of documentary films, by the filmmaker.

The compelling documentary *An Injury to One* (Travis Wilkerson, 2002), about the history of Butte, Montana, as a mining town and the murder there of a Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) organizer, Frank Little, in 1917, demonstrates vividly how facts convert to evidence and how their evidential status is contingent on the discourse to which they attach. At one point Wilkerson recounts the story of a large flock of geese that land on the enormous lake that fills the open-pit mine that still dominates the town. The lake is extremely toxic, loaded with copper, cadmium, zinc, nickel,

lead, arsenic, and sulfates; it has a pH of 2.5, "roughly comparable to battery acid," Wilkerson tells us in his intense but flatly spoken commentary. A storm takes the geese by surprise and they land on the lake. In the morning 342 geese are dead. They are blistered with lesions, their esophagi and tracheae corroded, and their livers bloated with toxic quantities of heavy metals. Wilkerson recounts that representatives for ARCO, the company that owns the mine, assured the townspeople that the water was actually safe; the geese died "because of something they ate," not from exposure to the lake water. Wilkerson concludes this section of his stunning film with an observation: "As the geese help to demonstrate, history, in this case, cannot be so easily expurgated [as the company's original name: Anaconda]. In an act reminiscent of a mass suicide, the geese hurled themselves into the open wound in the heart of the town. Perhaps using the only manner they knew, these creatures were trying to tell us something because it seemed to have escaped our notice. They were directing us to the scene of a crime."

The facts do not, as Wilkerson's sardonic tone suggests, speak for themselves: they must be seen, and heard, and thence interpreted, an act that fissures in multiple directions depending on the purposes and goals of the interpreter. ARCO interprets the death of 342 geese as evidence of a bad diet. Wilkerson sharply disagrees: he interprets it as evidence of a "mass suicide," a costly symbolic gesture pointing to a past crime. The event, however, can only be seen as accidental death, testimony, or anything else within the interpretive frame provided for it. Cast back by discourse into the external world, facts take up a place outside discourse and are made to do so in a way that allows their reincarnation as evidence to overlay perfectly the fact to which they correspond.

The indexical quality of the photographic image is ideally suited to this purpose. A perfect tautology appears to come into being between fact, object, or event, on the one hand, and evidence and interpretation, on the other, so that reference to a piece of evidence marries signified and referent in a single stroke. As the story of the geese suggests, the fact or event does not come into being as evidence; this status accrues later, when it is recruited to a discourse: "bad food," "mass suicide"—these labels become affixed to that which simply was. And they seem to stick because of an indexical bond between image and referent, that which exists outside the discursive chain.

Sometimes facts speak in ways not intended by the speaker or filmmaker. The viewer, too, may convert fact to evidence, sometimes in ways that run against the grain of their initial recruitment. In Marlon Riggs's powerful documentary about being black and gay in America, *Tongues Untied* (1990), Riggs crosscuts between a protest march in Selma, Alabama,

in the 1960s and a gay pride parade in New York City in the 1980s. For Riggs the parallel is evidence of a continuous lineage of protest and struggle for civil liberties and individual rights among African Americans. But there is a tremendous difference in the two pieces of footage if we examine them not as part of Riggs's stunning visual testament but as visible evidence of two distinct historical moments.

In the Selma march what is most striking is the rich diversity of the marchers themselves: young and old African Americans, young and old whites, male and female, primarily but not entirely well-dressed, religious leaders and laypeople, all marching to confront a racist society with their visible, demonstrable protest. The two most prominent banners read, "We March with Selma" and "We Shall Overcome." The gay pride march footage features a contingent of young black men, with two bare-chested black males carrying a banner that reads, "Black Men Loving Black Men Is *The* Revolutionary Act." The goal of mobilizing a broad, inclusive range of people to confront racism and champion civil rights has yielded to the proclamation of difference, the affirmation of an identity and a politics that seeks to embrace the like-minded and gain the public recognition of others. The spectrum of ages, classes, and races incorporated into and patently visible in the Selma march has disappeared. Belonging and activism are now predicated on a specific combination of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The male and female onlookers, mostly younger but occasionally older, along with a number of primarily white police officers lining the route of the gay pride parade, are a far more diverse group than the marchers themselves. The unity of purpose of an earlier time has yielded to the identity politics of a later one, or so an interpreter could argue just as forcefully as Riggs can argue for a line of continuity.

Similarly, Edward R. Murrow's powerful broadcast *Harvest of Shame* (1960), now inadvertently serves as evidence of massive historical shifts in the composition of the migrant-labor workforce: the migrant workers depicted in the film are almost entirely white or black, but now, several decades later, migrant workers are almost entirely Hispanic. The racial composition of the workforce was taken for granted at the time of broadcast—a fact rather than evidence—but now the film provides evidence of a remarkably thorough transformation that may once again seem natural, or taken for granted.

Careful consideration of this act of converting fact to evidence occurs in R. G. Collingwood's book *The Idea of History*, written in 1946 and dedicated to the idea of history as a scientific undertaking. During an extended discussion of "historical evidence," Collingwood debunks the view that history amounts to citing the testimony of credible authorities whose remarks

can be cut and pasted together to provide the requisite history. This outdated method relies on facts drawn from earlier, authoritative accounts—and whose status as evidence can go unquestioned for that reason—that now form the backbone of a new narrative. By contrast, Collingwood argues that good history writing requires making inferences that are always based on questions directed toward a careful examination of the facts themselves. They can only come to serve as valid evidence when freshly taken up in the author's own interpretive discourse. The historian must pose questions based on his or her inferences about what really happened rather than adopt the views of others. Wilkerson's comment about the geese, "Perhaps using the only manner they knew, these creatures were trying to tell us something because it seemed to have escaped our notice," becomes a standing assumption of critical inquiry: facts and occurrences exist, but their conversion into evidence and events depends on the analytic powers of the interpreter, be she or he historian or filmmaker.

But in the middle of this call for a methodologically rigorous history, Collingwood suddenly takes a surprising turn. A subheading entitled "Who Killed John Doe?" announces the detour. Contrary to the strictly expository style of all the previous sections, Collingwood now adopts a semifictional voice. The section begins, "When John Doe was found, early one Sunday morning, lying across his desk with a dagger through his back, no one expected that the question of who did it would be settled by means of testimony."¹ Here is a case where Collingwood can demonstrate the necessity of inferential analysis that, when done properly, will lead to a clear-cut solution.

Using Collingwood's own dicta that "everything in the world is potential evidence for any subject whatever"² and that we should focus not on the content of statements but on the fact that they are made—in other words, that our analysis must not accept what others represent the case to be but must ask, "What light is thrown on the subject in which I am interested by the fact that this person made this statement?"—we can ask, Why does Collingwood tell this whodunit in the middle of his disquisition on history?

Clearly, it serves as an example, if not allegory, for good historical investigation. It serves Collingwood's goal of giving the impression that history writing can become a science, capable of determining what really happened in an unambiguous manner through an independent examination of facts and testimony. Inferences lead to knowledge and knowledge leads to the one and only logical solution: the rector did it, in this case. Ambiguity is dispelled thanks to the hard work of the historian laboring in the vineyards of the local, empirically verifiable, event. Not all rectors should now be suspected of murder, nor should all murders be attributed to rectors, but in

this concrete case, with these facts and statements and with this set of questions to transform facts and statements into evidence, the rector's guilt can be cleanly determined.

By presenting a Sherlock Holmes-like murder mystery, Collingwood can arrive at a specific solution to a concrete question. The solution, though, lacks generalizing power: it tells us nothing about the behavior of rectors or the causes of murder in general. The example offers a definite conclusion, based on asking questions whose answers generate evidence: a footprint in the wet soil of the lawn becomes admitted as evidence as soon as we ask a question such as, "Who might have crossed the lawn that fateful night but only after the rain fell?"

Though instructive, Collingwood's choice of a murder mystery as metaphor reduces his method to factual determinations that cannot account for historical complexity. He neglects to add to his assertion that "everything in the world is potential evidence for any subject whatever" *and can therefore support a wide range of interpretations*. Or, as Wittgenstein put it, "Everything we can describe at all could also be otherwise."³ The murder mystery involves facts, questions, evidence, and interpretation of a different order from those involved when we ask what brought about the transformation of communism into totalitarianism, why capitalism undergoes cycles of growth and recession, whether observational documentaries convey a higher degree of authenticity than expository ones, or how funding sources have shaped the form and content of documentaries over the last decade or two. Questions such as these propel us into a realm rather remote from the indisputable evidence, clear-cut verification procedures, and singular conclusions that Collingwood naturalizes as the common stuff of history through his exemplary fiction.

Collingwood, in fact, builds his conception of proper historiography on the Aristotelian notion of "inartistic proofs"—evidence, that is, that exists outside, or can readily be made to appear to reside outside, the discursive chain. Examples include laws, witnesses, contracts, oaths, documents, and confessions obtained by torture (a practice reserved, in Aristotle's time, for slaves since citizens would give their own testimony artistically, that is, with benefit of the rhetorical arts). This is the evidence that can most easily be "thrown out" of the discourse as fact in order to be reeled back in as evidence. Science, like murder mysteries, works with objective facts; the form a precise account of them takes is of minor consequence. Form, for Collingwood, is little more than a question of elaborating a style; the proof is in facts that serve as evidence. Careful interpretation leads us down a straight and narrow path to the truth, not into a labyrinth of competing

interests and multiple interpretations whose merits may be decided more by power, or at least rhetoric, than by logic.

Although seemingly the most irrefutable of evidence, inartistic proofs were of minor concern to Aristotle. The "artistic proofs" that were the heart and soul of rhetorical discourse concerned him much more. Though necessary, inartistic proofs still have to be incorporated into a discourse where they become convincing. Alone, the inartistic proofs might be necessary but hardly sufficient. Only when such proofs took on their second life as evidence inside a body of signification—discourse—did it become possible for a convincing argument to emerge. *How* inartistic proofs become incorporated into the discourse thus matters more than *what* these proofs reveal in and of themselves. It is here that the voice of the filmmaker, like that of the orator, enters the scene.

What concerned Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, among others, were the artistic proofs that strove to guarantee the ethical credibility of a speaker, the emotional response of an audience, and the convincingness of an argument (including the convincingness of inferences or interpretations drawn from inartistic proofs). These are questions regarding rhetorical, not philosophic or logical, discourse. The protocols of science eschew such discourse. Rhetoric or persuasive speech, it is said, mires us in deception; it lacks a moral compass; it leads to ideology rather than knowledge. Or so it seemed to Plato and to Roland Barthes, when, in 1964, he wrote his seminal essay, "The Rhetoric of the Image," and so it seems to those who attack filmmakers like Michael Moore for "distorting" or "inventing" facts that serve as tendentious evidence, as if there could be any other kind once we enter the arena of human affairs, where science no longer reigns supreme.

Barthes's essay, which, for me, marks the beginning of the end for an understanding of the crucial role of rhetoric in contemporary culture (except as handmaiden to ideology), asks questions about the meaning of an image, in this case, an advertisement for Panzani pasta sauce in the form of a photograph of a shopping net filled with fresh vegetables and Panzani products, their labels clearly legible. Like Collingwood, Barthes is moved to question authority, to refuse to accept the advertisement at its word. Barthes asks of the image, as Collingwood did of his suspects, How does it disguise what it says as something natural and obvious?

Like Collingwood's whodunit, Barthes's analysis of the ad reduces the mystery of meaning to one and only one conclusion. The image represents ideology. It does so because it sets out to naturalize Panzani. The advertisement equates a can of pasta sauce with the fresh, wholesome bounty of the farm by making a collage of the two images. A perfect tautology exists:

fresh vegetables are Panzani; Panzani is fresh vegetables, nothing more or less. We harvest the product, Panzani, from the same rich bounty of the earth as the ingredients it contains. Like the fly cast by the fisherman, it is at one with its natural surroundings. Or as Barthes puts it himself, "To the general ideology, that is, correspond signifiers of connotation which are specified according to the chosen substance [sound, image, gesture and so on]. These signifiers will be called *connotators* and the set of connotators a rhetoric, rhetoric thus appearing as the signifying aspect of ideology."⁴ It is no longer the rector who did it but ideology. The power of rhetoric to move an audience by establishing a credible, compelling, and convincing case of any kind, on any subject, for any purpose becomes reduced to the power of rhetoric to put ideology into practice.

This line of thought returns us to Plato's attack on rhetoric as a corrupting form of flattery or deception. Plato terms the proper cultivation of the body "gymnastics," which strengthen the body's innate capabilities, and its corrupt form cosmetics, or *kosmètikè*, an ornamentality that renders appearances false and leaves the body's innate capacities untouched.⁵ In an attempt to preserve the centrality of rhetoric as discourse measured by its effects without dismissing it as sheer deception, Quintilian differentiates between the use of cosmetics such as color, ornament, gesture, and emotion for venal and noble purposes.⁶ His negative example involves slave dealers who use cosmetics to increase the value of those whom they sell by giving them a flattering appearance. Such an appearance renders the slave overvalued, a form, that is, of fetishization, and any subsequent transaction dishonest. This would seem to be the category in which advertisements, and certainly the Panzani ad, fall.

Venal purposes contrast, for Quintilian, with the art of the noble orator who sees speech as an instrument for the expression of views strongly believed and compellingly conveyed.⁷ "In place of the cosmetic body Quintilian puts a political body. . . . As the place of political relations, the body escapes from the moral disdain of metaphysics. . . . The body—image, passion, pleasure, effect, and affect—gains legitimacy in politics and in rhetoric too. . . . By all these shifts Quintilian succeeds in justifying the definition of rhetoric as wisdom. . . . To ensure the victory of justice, eloquence is thus within its rights to apply itself not only to instructing the soul but also to moving the body."⁸ This "eloquence" is what I term "voice" by another name.

Rhetoric, in other words, may deceive, but it is the only means we have as social actors, or filmmakers, for conveying our beliefs, perspectives, and convictions persuasively. A rhetoric of persuasion strives to move others; it

shocks, disturbs, provokes, inspires, galvanizes, or defamiliarizes, displaying the old in a new, revelatory manner. In this case the rhetoric of the image belongs to a struggle for power in which the meaning and effect of an image or film cannot be determined in advance as simply and always ideological in the sense of serving the interests of the status quo by the use of deception. Instead, the rhetoric of the image, or film, speaks, as narrative or logic might speak, with multiple purposes and to different ends but in ways that strive to compel belief as much as they might please or prove. Rhetoric gives a distinct voice to those who wish their perspective and their interpretation to enter into dialogue with that of others.

Voice refers to the ways in which a documentary film speaks to its audience. *An Injury to One, Tongues Untied, The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain, 2003), *The Agronomist* (Johnathan Demme, 2003), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (Patricio Guzmán, 2004), and *The Maelstrom* (Péter Forgács, 1997), among others, evidence a voice that speaks probingly and responsively to others as well as angrily to injustice, abuse, exploitation, racism, antisemitism, cruelty, and other barbarisms. It acknowledges its subject, and audience, as its equal, not its object, target, victim, or tool. If style turns attention to the one who addresses us, voice turns attention to the audience addressed.

Often, this voice includes the personal but untrained voice of the filmmaker him- or herself rather than the impersonal, professional delivery of a voice-over commentator. The filmmaker's voice stresses the sense of direct encounter, an embodied perspective, relayed to the viewer. Something personal is at stake, as it clearly is in Marlon Riggs's film: his own experience as a black, gay man gave him a distinct perspective on racism that now inflects the voice that speaks to us.

This is no less true of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Oh! Uomo* (2004), which, without spoken commentary of any kind, speaks nonetheless compellingly through its compilation of archival footage of abandoned orphans, scavenging youths, and disfigured veterans from the First World War. The eyes of the starving, traumatized, and lost engage the camera that encountered them so many decades ago with a vivid openness and acute intensity that cries out for response. The filmmakers, through the duration of shots that accumulate into a requiem to catastrophe, offer a delayed response that engages us in a near hypnotic séance with survivors and victims who are fleetingly reanimated before us.

Such films face the challenge of how to speak of that which escapes our notice, like the "mass suicide" of the geese in *An Injury to One*. Hubert

Sauper confronts this question forcefully in *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), when all he can find are the horrific consequences of a highly lucrative fishing industry that flies frozen Nile perch from Lake Victoria, in Africa, to Russia and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the massive and accidentally introduced perch devour every other species of fish in the lake, indigenous residents of the lake's surrounding land live off the thousands of filleted fish carcasses left to rot in the sun, and some tribal women have little choice but to enter into prostitution. Like Wilkerson's geese, these carcasses of fish heads and bones direct us to the scene of a crime.

Monstration, the act of asking viewers to look at what the filmmaker hopes they will convert from fact to evidence, increases in difficulty when the subject lies buried in the past and when the visible signs of a mass political movement flicker uncertainly. Like *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996), with its discovery of a buried badge that launches a quest to learn the consequences of what happened many years before, films like *An Injury to One, Chile, Obstinate Memory, Life and Debt* (Stephanie Black, 2001), and *Maelstrom* all address the political landscape of past and present but with no expectation that interpretive frames are readily available for application. Voice now functions to guide viewers toward an interpretive frame that they must help build.

The documentary voice that has taken form in recent times is clearly an oratorical voice but not a dogmatic one. It is the multidimensioned, embodied voice of films that speak to viewers in the hopes of moving them, predisposing them, inducing a sense of political and historical consciousness that represents a step toward going beyond established boundaries by means of a truth that had escaped awareness. As Werner Herzog put it, in speaking of the quality he seeks in his documentary work (the particular reference was *Grizzly Man* [2005] and what we learn of the horizon at which the animal and human conjoin), "In great moments of cinema you are hit and struck by some sort of enlightenment, by something that illuminates you. That's a deep form of truth, and I call it ecstatic truth, the ecstasy of truth, and that's what I'm after in documentaries and feature films."⁹ Hit and struck. This is a form of knowledge or a way of seeing that is closer to a paradigm shift than the accretion of information in the service of conventional learning, mystery solving, or the marshalling of evidence to serve a preexisting form of political activism. Herzog's ecstatic documentary is the work of orators who set out not to show but to move, to establish movement that may come in a flash and extend forward in an altered temporality.

This form of knowing presupposes finding the means to bring to a condition of visibility what has remained less visible, or not visible at all. It sets

out to identify what may attain visibility and yet still not be seen (understood) since what is seen is a trace, sign, symptom, or consequence of that which remains beyond the net of words and the reductive aspect of naming. The geese, perch, wounded soldiers, and even grizzly bears speak with their actions. The mining pit turned toxic; the African lake, source of the Nile, turned killing field; the shattered jaws and missing noses of the veterans of World War I in *Oh! Uomo*; the grizzlies that lurk, waiting and following instincts beyond the reckoning of Timothy Treadwell—all speak of consequences that "hit and strike" us. This is a form of speech that can predispose us to see anew and, in seeing anew, to make a radical shift in what is both true and yet still a mystery. No words can contain such mystery, but some forms of speech can render it visible.

A powerful example of such speech, one that requires a retroactive reading, occurs in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, about the attempted coup that ousted Hugo Chávez from power in Venezuela for a brief period. At one point President Chávez arrives at the Presidential Palace, where the Palace Guard stands at attention and salutes him. Chávez casually starts a conversation with one officer and then, as he enters the palace, playfully rubs his hand on the belly of the soldier standing at attention, guarding the entrance. Chávez was an officer himself, and he clearly retains substantial rapport with these officers. Later, after the coup has taken place and Chávez is held captive, the insurgents, remarkably, are routed from this very palace. And who was responsible? The Palace Guard. At this point the viewer may well realize that prior events—a casual conversation, a pat on the belly—can function as evidence in an interpretive argument about how Hugo Chávez returned to power. The film need not say anything directly; the evidence is in the image, if we can see and interpret it. The film speaks through its imagery as readily as through its verbal commentary.

The voice considered here is often a poetic voice that seeks to convey what it feels like to enter into the past, what it feels like to enter into other lives, what it feels like to experience oppressive, violent conditions and to emerge with an altered sense of self by being placed in relation to others who pass before us. In *An Injury to One* Wilkerson scans across a long procession of mug shots of the hundreds of miners arrested as Wobblies in Butte. This "night train" of shots moves past in the center of the frame, with large black borders at top and bottom. The photographs serve as a reminder of the repressive uses of what was a relatively new technology at the time, photography, but it now restores these men to visibility and celebrates them as heroes who, once silenced, stare defiantly, not at arresting police officers but us.

The oratorical voice of documentary uses previous times and disparate places to establish the multiple points necessary to form a trajectory that moves forward with a utopian desire to uphold a set of principles and expose a series of consequences. It brings these consequences—exploitation, oppression, poverty, destruction, military coups, neocolonial occupations, economic deprivations, global immiseration, social degradation, torture and murder, injustices to one and all—to a condition of visibility, if we can see and understand what this voice brings forth as fact without necessarily explaining verbally. This is a voice that can no longer assume we all see things the same way, as Barthes and Collingwood did. The political base in shared experience seen the same way, with shared principles and common goals, is too fragile, too precarious for that, and even if it were not, affirming what is already known is different from seeing anew what stands before us.

The voice with which an image or film speaks is capable, of course, of innumerable effects—many of which may well be ideological but not necessarily ideological in the sense of reinforcing the status quo. Speech and images may embody counterideologies designed to subvert or reject the status quo.¹⁰ To reexamine the tradition of “downcast eyes” and suspicion about the rhetoric of the image as ideology invites an investigation of, among other things, representational film practice, where speaking on behalf of counterideologies is frequently the *raison d'être* of the work in the first place.¹¹ Documentary filmmaking, with its strong ties to a tradition of liberal amelioration and radical transformation is one such practice. The body of the film, and filmmaker, with its expressive mix of passion and knowledge sets out to move us. Such movement can contest the status quo as readily as it can confirm it; such movement is the constitutive domain in which power and pleasure combine to achieve political effect.

Collingwood rightfully advocated an approach in which evidence is seen as what is made to appear in response to a question. From this perspective a fact can become evidence despite itself, despite reticence or a lack of any intention of serving as evidence. (Symptoms consistently possess such a quality.) A fact or object can suddenly turn into evidence once we put a question to it. Questions do not stem from the image, or from the fact, object, or event to which it refers, but from what we ask of it. Barthes own questions had this quality about images, but Barthes seemed content to locate a meaning and effect *in* the image as if his interrogation exposed what the image itself sought to conceal through its cosmetic application of a “lustral bath of innocence” to a consumer product.¹² When we recognize that evidence emerges as a response to the questions we pose, we are in a position to recognize the ambiguity of that evidence: with a different

question, different evidence, and different arguments, different conclusions would have emerged.

The radically different interpretations, resulting from sharply distinct questions, of the Rodney King footage are a vivid example. Rhetorically, these questions retroactively fabricated quite different "lustral baths of innocence," as it were, for Mr. King or for his assailants, members of the Los Angeles Police Department who pursued, beat, and arrested him for speeding, fleeing, and then resisting them. That is to say, opposing perspectives and different questions led to radically disparate interpretations by the prosecution and the defense at the two trials of the police officers accused of beating Mr. King.¹³ The voice of documentary is largely given over, as a rhetorical utterance designed to move us, to shaping and focusing the polysemous quality of sound and image. Innocence and other qualities emerge after the fact, as that which a rhetorical voice desires to confer on what will be identified as evidence.

Despite the certainty that rhetorical utterances wish to confer, images retain a fundamental ambiguity that whodunits, advertising, and other forms of reductionism minimize. Barthes's later writing embraces such ambiguity, although he never went back to revise his earlier writing about the image and its ideological effect. For every social issue divergent positions emerge, with overlapping forms of evidence used as answers to different rhetorical questions. No denotative plane of certainty underpins these differences. The voice and gestures of the orator or the film's body seek to move us in relation to those social issues and conflicts that do not lend themselves to scientific determination and unanimous agreement.

Style, form, and voice are the heart and soul of persuasive engagement, and persuasive engagement is at the core of political discourses and social practices, whatever their ideological underpinnings. We inhabit an arena that remains fully within the shadow of ideology. There is no exit, only the constant effort to pose questions, present evidence, and make arguments that move us beyond what has come before. Leaving certitude behind moves us into an arena of radical doubt that cannot be dispelled so much as deferred, suspended, and, ultimately, embraced as part and parcel of a movement whose direction and intensity remain open to all the vicissitudes of history.

9 The Terrorist Event

White House officials see a pattern of terrorism which they believe may be an attempt to test the will of . . . the American people.

—**Leslie Stahl**, *CBS News* (regarding hostages on TWA Flight 847 held in Beirut, June 1985)

More and more American servicemen are going peacefully about their peaceful rounds and being murdered for it.

—**Bruce Morton**, *CBS News* (regarding six Americans killed in El Salvador, June 20, 1985)

BRUTUS. Let's to the Capitol,
And carry with us ears and eyes for th' time,
But hearts for the event.

—*Coriolanus*, 2.1

VIEWING DISASTER

September 11, 2001, introduced the United States to the experience of domestic terrorism as no other event has ever done. For most people, word of this event first arrived as live television bulletins: we are at home, or work. We see images of disaster of an extraordinary magnitude. A plane slices into the World Trade Center. Flames and smoke billow from the wound. Lives are surely lost.

As the morning unfolds, television news anchors interrupt regular programming to speak to us from their studio chambers as they report what eludes comprehension but portends tragedy. Their reports and images offer evidence of a catastrophic event but provide no context or perspective. If it be evidence, of what might it be so? It is as if live television coverage rips the flesh from the face of the world and hurls it into our living rooms. Shocking, grotesque, obscene—this should not be imaginable let alone real. And yet it occurs—as rippled relays of incomprehensible destruction, catastrophic ruin. What has happened? What may happen as a consequence?

Live television coverage tumbles forward as interminable flow. The usual interruptions for advertisements and changes of program disappear. "Breaking news" gives an irregular rhythm to the syncopated, postmodern mix of images and comments, graphics and live broadcasts, recaps and conjecture, descriptions, repetitions, and interviews that tumble forward. News anchors in the studio, reporters in the field, witnesses and survivors, news footage taken and transmitted, still images and maps, later that morning, amateur footage found and recycled—this work of our media bricoleurs confounds, compels, and terrifies.

In the case of a live, simultaneous unfolding, "news" occurs outside any context. Facts are scarce. Background information does not exist. No one can narrate the trajectory of a story line when the actual existence of a story remains uncertain. Mayhem refutes narrative. Chronology is all we have. When did it happen? What happened next? What does it mean? In what sense can it be called an event? What is its origin, and when will it end? Can we stop watching before we know the answer?

What happened on September 11 began unburdened by such considerations, which began to take shape, retrospectively, in medias res, as the search for answers gained momentum. A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center. Almost certainly a terrible example of the new order of magnitude that modern technology provides to the accident. How many are injured and what can be done? Is the building in any danger? Or others on the streets?

Such questions abruptly shift with the sight of a second plane plunging into the second World Trade Center Tower, news of a third plane slamming into the Pentagon, bulletins of a fourth plane crashing in western Pennsylvania, and reports that the president of the United States is aboard Air Force One, his response and location unknown.

What grows to near certainty is that no accident could present so vivid but unfathomable a pattern. Hours after the first occurrence, the conviction of these occurrences as part of an attack by an unknown, almost inconceivable enemy looms large. Who would do such a thing? How could they do it, with commercial airline planes? For what purpose? As part of what larger plan? Invasion? Diversion? Warning? No one knows. Telecasts paper over this fundamental ignorance with hypotheses and speculation. Viewers—as well as survivors, witnesses, political leaders, and military commanders—grope for a frame within which to place this affront. Comprehension lacks a foothold. Understanding falters. Meaning proves elusive. The news catapults the nation into the grip of trauma, of shock without meaning. By midday it grows clear that an attack has taken place, but by whom and for what end remains a mystery. . . .

MAKING MEANING

Although the sudden disruption of media programming makes confusion itself into an event, viewers experience profound uncertainty about what this succession of occurrences might signify or within what chain of signification—within what story or account—it might be explained.¹ Such uncertainty multiplies enormously for those directly caught up within the maelstrom of disaster whose nature, contours, and extent remain utterly unknown. Viewers respond to the imperative, “Stay tuned,” but those on the scene must respond to life-altering imperatives of a different order: stay or flee, ascend or descend, assist others or save oneself. Decisions must be made, swiftly, without knowledge of what it is, exactly, to which one is responding.

Maurice Blanchot comments that “since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it.”² Blanchot’s remark pinpoints a paradox: occurrences coalesce into an event after the fact. Henceforth what seemed utterly confounding will bear a name and at least partial meaning. But our encounter with what will become an event precedes the act of identifying it as an event—disaster, attack, or otherwise. Such an encounter cannot, therefore, stand as an experience of what has yet to be named or understood. Experience is retroactive; encounter is traumatic.

No one experienced what took place on the morning of September 11 as an event (except the perpetrators). Instead, the ghastly succession of appalling images and dumbfounding information confronts us as the kind of occurrence that defies all categories of experience. Calamity, catastrophe, disaster, holocaust, and terrorist attack—such names mark, and bind, what has occurred but cannot contain what is still in the process of taking form as an event. No words are adequate, not simply in the sense of being of an incommensurate order of magnitude with what takes place but in the more basic sense that this encounter exists outside the domain of language, discourse, and comprehension altogether. Naming it is an act of dragging it back into the realm of reason and language. Once named as an event, it possesses a form that allows experience and response to take shape around it. It becomes evidence rather than raw fact.

But in the initial moments of unfolding, grasping for words offers minimal consolation and no coherence. Speech merely gestures toward the loss of meaning, a gash in the social fabric. The effort to name unfathomable, inexplicable, terrifying experiences signifies a certain desperation. We stand at the abyss, tottering, with little more than language and its power to spin webs of signification to prevent our fall.

If a disastrous occurrence can be identified as an event, as 9/11 was to be, it becomes a candidate for topical address and historical placement. That which arose at the boundaries of the social order passes the border check-point that permits entry into the realm of comprehension. This, however, does not settle the matter. "Is it an event?" yields to a more politically fraught question: "What kind of event is it?" Every answer carries moral, political, and ideological implications. Agreement about the *fact* of the event converts a series of incidents into a conceptual whole. Debate about the *kind* of event recruits this incident to a larger discursive chain. As evidence, the "event unit" enters into discourse that embeds the event within an unfolding social debate where different interpretations and proposed responses contend. I will return to the question of what kind of event 9/11 was shortly.

Unlike documentary representations, including television news, which set out to tell a story about a familiar, historical world, live media coverage of a disaster finds itself shorn of both a historical perspective and a narrative frame. Commentators and witnesses may revert to mythic evocations of a primordial chaos prior to the "in the beginning . . ." of a discernible order. Images arrive as remains, the remains of the referent, fragments bereft of meaning. Live media coverage finds itself taken hostage by an unfolding drama it cannot comprehend. (*One Day in September* [Kevin Macdonald, 1999], about the capture of the 1972 Israeli Olympic team by pro-Palestinian terrorists, makes the utter confusion of the media during this event abundantly clear.) Television news, in fact, disseminates the *mise-en-scène* of terrorist desire itself: confusion, loss, shock, silence.³ Terrorism holds the media hostage to the emergent event much as the media does its audience.⁴

Live television coverage differs in this regard from "real-time" but mediated interactions. Real-time interactions link a set of occurrences with an agent who can control or manipulate these occurrences from a distance, at a remove. The event is the sum of the occurrences plus the interventions of the interactive agent. The agent may occupy a position in the same cybernetic system or may simply have a means of access to it: a drone pilot may activate weapons that attack a target at a distance but within the same real, historical world as the operator, whereas a video game player may interact with elements of a spatiotemporal world conjured by and existing solely within a computer simulation. Real-time interactions represent a technological prosthetic for the extension of power. Live television coverage of a disaster represents a technological prosthetic for the extension of powerlessness.⁵

Live media coverage of any disaster puts us on the scene, live but vicariously; the reporting dramatizes the disaster's magnitude and simultaneously reassures us of our remove from it. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California exemplifies the simultaneity of a virtual presence and a corporeal absence. Within minutes of its occurrence, images of chaos and devastation arrive. The nature of the event as earthquake was almost immediately known, and this made a considerable difference in the nature of the coverage. Motives and plans, the full extensiveness of the action and the options available for response, crucial to deciphering what happened on 9/11, were either not relevant or not immediately known. Live coverage could afford to be smug in the face of a natural disaster. It functioned on the occasion of this massive earthquake with the calm of a puppet master who, largely unseen, orchestrates, controls, and establishes the frame that mediates response. The reporter or news anchor belongs to a spatiotemporal margin between those directly affected and the audience. The structure of a known event excuses the reporter, and audience, from full, participatory engagement; it prepares a space for observation and spectacle.

"Professional" in one sense, this detachment or marginality also renders the news of catastrophe irrelevant to those caught up within it. The needs of those who experienced the effects of the Loma Prieta earthquake greatly exceeded the pathos of spectacle. Practical, tangible information was paramount: What roads were open? Which homes or buildings remained safe, and which did not? Where were shelters available? How could groundwater be made drinkable? But news coverage circumvented victims and their needs to address an audience always presumed to be elsewhere. Marginality converts itself into centrality, adding to the trauma of victims who now find themselves serving as an index of the magnitude of a catastrophe for an audience barred from intervention.⁶

The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were different in degree if not kind. The lack of a framework of comprehension for the incidents heightened the sense of participatory identification. Everyone seemed caught up in the same inexplicable chaos. Empathy grew, globally in fact, and trauma spread as no one proved able to give punctuation to the event and mark it closed or to give a name to the event and render it available for interpretation.

As a telemediated crisis, September 11 was exceptional. The stupendous monumentality of it, the horrific trauma, the sheer uncertainty about its nature, extent, or purpose—all of this put to the test the process of making sense of what first appeared as senseless annihilation. Did passing this test mean making a string of occurrences coalesce into a familiar shape that

confers the status of event on that which operates at the boundaries of all those events that constitute a culture, a civilization, and a history? And how was this act followed by the act of locating this event within a narrative account that assigned agency, inferred intentionality, and planned a response?

Both these operations—identification and narration—serve vital functions, but at what price do our media commentators and politicians deploy them when the occurrence itself tests the limits of these processes, exposing the phantasmagoric underbelly of a response that, on its surface, is forthright and measured?

IN SEARCH OF A PATTERN

Identification with and narratives about the attack of September 11 invite consideration of "the modernist event." The modernist event involves those technologically assisted events of such scale and horror—genocide, nuclear warfare, mass starvation, "ethnic cleansing," and so forth—that the very notion of an adequate historical narrative falls into question.⁷ The term *modernist event* is Hayden White's, and he explains it this way:

[Modernist events] function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacity to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.

... It is the anomalous nature of modernist events—their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning them meanings—that undermines not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of "the event" in general.

... [One result is the difficulty] felt by present generations of arriving at some agreement as to their *meaning*—by which I mean, what the facts established about such events could possibly tell us about the nature of our own current social and cultural endowment and what attitude we ought to take with respect to them as we make plans for our own future. In other words, what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing.⁸

The media and American government have concurred, for the most part, on what the events of September 11 mean, but they have done so, I would

argue, by treating the event as a traditional rather than a modernist one. The difficulty leaders have experienced in acknowledging the traumatic nature of the event and the work of mourning relative to the prosecution of "war" against an ill-defined, extraterritorial and extragovernmental enemy (terrorists) is one indication. The uncertain application of categories of agency, responsibility, policy, or purpose to such an enemy is another.

How have we conferred meaning on these images of disaster? Not, I would suggest, via the "indexical whammy" of images of giant jetliners slicing through concrete and steel nor of entire buildings plummeting to earth. Such images disseminate the shock of such experience and induce a desire for therapeutic knowledge. Indexicality attests to the *fact* of the occurrence but offers nothing by way of an interpretive account or explanation. Evidence of what remains an unanswered question.

Nor, I would also argue, is meaning conferred via the more sociological or Marxist claim that the truth of the image flows not from its own interior but from its controlling surround. In this view the meaning of these images becomes assigned to them by (1) an institutional framework that promises to distinguish images of evidence from images of fantasy, (2) a nonfictional "discourse of sobriety" that assumes an instrumental power capable of interacting directly with the social reality of which it is a part,⁹ (3) the political agendas embedded in these discursive conventions—from maintaining market share by performing a public service at any cost for media outlets to maintaining a sense of social order for political and civic leaders, and (4) the ideological assumptions that underpin these operations, from the sanctity and innocence of the American nation-state to the stress on individual responsibility that makes possible the identification of crimes and the distribution of punishment.

Instead, I would like to suggest a third framework that stresses a zone of ambiguity within indexical or institutional arguments: is it possible that the "ultimate referent" that points toward "what really happened" exists neither in the image per se nor in the material conditions of its production and circulation but *in* the relation entertained among the image flow, its social or semiotic context, *and the viewer*? Our gut-response, our interpretive gestures, our willingness to suspend disbelief all suggest that we remain prepared to discover meaning in the image itself. Our reliance on knowledge of genres and conventions, institutions and their discourses suggests that we temper what we see with an awareness of how it is produced. But is there anything about the image, or how it is produced, that *guarantees* its status independent of our own activity? Is any guarantee anything other than a necessary fiction? This question underscores the fundamental ambiguity of

the image, an ambiguity that is only exacerbated in modernist events that take place at the margins of traditional ideas about the event and its representation. Neither the indexical nature of the image nor the discursive character of the surrounding social frame, particularly traditional realist ones, guarantees comprehension. Neither makes meaning alone; the act of constructing a story—the making of meaning—demands a viewer.

In the case of 9/11 the interpretation of live media coverage involves the *assignment* of meaning to an information flow that stupefies more than it illuminates. Recognition of this continuous sensory flow as signifiers requires its conversion into meaningful units, not the emanation or application of meaning to already existing units, which we acknowledge and understand. It is we who actively distinguish the figure from its ground, who see a gestalt take shape phantasmagorically. (It is not there to be seen; it takes shape within the subject.) Sensory impressions arrive as an ebb and flow of shock and sensation, spectacle and information, without division into clear and distinct signifying units. Signifiers dissolve in a reflux of sensory impressions. Narrative structure proves elusive. We respond to an initial disturbance, a violent launching of narrative energy, but with what heroes and villains, with what sense of agency and responsibility, suspense and resolution? The *desire* to answer such questions is intense, but the modernist event thwarts them at every turn.

The assignment of a signified literally hands over to the image forms of meaning that are of the viewer's own devising. In one sense of the word this assignment is *fantastic*; it mimics the work of fantasy. It posits meaning where there would otherwise be none. A psychic investment of considerable magnitude comes into play. Its fundamental goal is to overcome the experience of meaninglessness, of unbounded confusion, and the singular shock of trauma. One key step in this process is the designation of certain occurrences as evidence of an "event" so that it can be recruited to a larger narrative or to contending narratives.

WHAT'S THE STORY HERE?

"What's happening?" is a question that invites a story. The story of an event, however, remains unavailable during its duration. The act of assigning a set of occurrences to the category "event" itself signals the event's completion, or at least an anticipation that it will be brought to completion. Identifying an event prepares it to join yet other events, functions, or actions in the construction of a narrative. In the heat of the moment, before recognition of the boundaries of an event takes place, such as those moments

that seemed to commence at 8:46 a.m., September 11, 2001—when the first plane struck the south tower of the World Trade Center—the meaning and magnitude of the catastrophe eludes comprehension. The sequence of occurrences defies the traditional signs of an event such as the presence of clear causes, natural or human, and, if human, plausible intentions. “What’s happening?” remains a confounding question of staggering proportions.

As a word, *event* harbors the difficulty of assigning meaning in its very definition. Definitions such as “occurrences of some importance,” “something that happens,” or “that which follows from a course of proceedings” make it clear that events lack a coherent, internal structure; their identification follows from the retrospective impression that an “occurrence of some importance” has taken place. (That historians regard accidents as prototypical events stresses the way in which the event appears to stand out and define itself against a more uniform ground.) The etymology—from L. *evenutus*, fr. past part. of *evenire*, fr. *ē* + *venīre* [out + to come, hence, to come out]—also points toward an origin that defines it. And yet this origin in a prior moment proves elusive since it is only *after* its occurrence that the event proves identifiable. The sense of an origin is, perhaps, the fiction necessary to disavow the impression that events occur *sui generis* even if this is how they may be initially experienced, especially traumatic ones. Ritual or predictable events such as a parade or birth might appear to have specific causes or origins, but these points of origin themselves dissolve into larger and longer chains of preconditions that do more to establish the possibility of the event than to guarantee its occurrence. Our understanding of history as contingent, and perhaps intrinsically meaningless, is at stake here.

At the time of its unfolding, the beginning of an unanticipated event does not stand in a metonymic relation to the entirety of the event. The whole of which it is a part has yet to be determined. Rather than *stand for* a whole, the part awaits *assignment* to a whole, something that can only occur in a retroactive act of recognition. The familiar processes of fantasy, dream-work, or narrative construction, be it fictional or nonfictional, comes into play to carry out the necessary assignments and generate the effect of recognition. This is why the viewer or social actor is a necessary supplement to the indexicality of the image or the institutional framework of its circulation.

On September 11 no one knew what hit them. Everyone underwent an experience of intense magnitude, possibly of physical travail and loss, certainly of confusion and anxiety. Each person had a perspective on the occurrences as they happened but not in the form of a linear model, in which all

aspects of the occurrence cohere by arising from a known origin and receding toward a common destination. The occurrences of September 11, which retroactively constituted an event, the event that live television coverage strove mightily to discover, had not yet arranged themselves in an orderly grid of specifiable spatiotemporal coordinates, a precondition to causal explanation.¹⁰ Efforts to establish a spatiotemporal field centered on a singular vantage point necessarily entail misrecognition as well as recognition.

The process of recognition/misrecognition occurs in a heightened way in relation to trauma. As White points out, the experience can be neither forgotten nor understood. It casts a shadow across our lives and continues to do so as long as its meaning remains elusive. We rework the event to assign meaning that will free us from its "debilitating effects." The assignment of meaning establishes a horizon to chaos, panic, and trauma, and it identifies or misidentifies an agent responsible for it.

FRAMING THINGS

There is no satisfactory meaning to a traumatic event; this is what makes it traumatic. As a set of sensory impressions, or as signifiers with incomplete signifieds, the experience, image, or event stands vacant. Bestowing form enacts a misrecognition of the fundamental nature of the experience itself, what Blanchot termed our inability to experience a disaster that is always defined as a disaster after the fact. The emergence of a gestalt betrays the very thing to which it retroactively refers. This infidelity to staggeringly hurtful experience is what, I take it, those who stress the unrepresentability of catastrophes and traumas such as the Holocaust wish to emphasize above all.¹¹

As an *ex post facto* label, "9/11" signifies the temporal contours or boundedness of this event: it began and, in retrospect, sufficiently concluded on that specific day to allow the date to name it. Such punctuation is of a different logical type from the occurrences themselves.¹² It is not a "context" that extends the series in spatial or temporal directions, potentially without limits, but a *category* that encapsulates the series. Such punctuation is a metamessage that tells us what kind of occurrence a set of sensory impressions is or, at a yet higher level, what kind of event an event is. We group sense impressions into an overall pattern such as "This is a memory," "This is a fantasy," or "This is an event."

The identification of a figure/ground relationship, a gestalt image ("accident," "evil," or "terrorism," for example)—may be fundamental to all communication and behavior. It generates the discrete units necessary for discourse. Once accomplished, the dynamics of recognition/misrecognition

lead to a historical narrative that will explain its importance and locate it in relation to that from which it comes out. "This is an act of God," "This is an accident," or "This is terrorism," tell different stories of origin and meaning. In the case of 9/11 the dominant story so far tends to reassert the primacy of the individual victim and the generic quality of the perpetrators, the centrality of terrorist strategy, the need for homeland security, the combination of innocence and righteousness that characterizes Americans, and the necessity of retaliation. Once named, the mourning of a traumatic event can commence. But once named in this particular way, within this particular narrative frame, the work of mourning may find itself minimized or subordinated to goals other than the arduous working through of loss.

Roland Barthes notes that "the sequence exists when and because it can be given a name, it unfolds as this process of naming takes place, as a title is sought or confirmed."¹³ Titles or names signify a bounded condition. As Gregory Bateson remarks: "We assume that the psychological frame has some degree of real existence. In many instances, the frame is consciously recognized, and even represented in vocabulary ('play,' 'movie,' 'interview,' 'job,' 'language,' ['terrorism'], etc.). In other cases, there may be no explicit verbal reference to the frame, and the subject may have no consciousness of it. The analyst, however, finds that his own thinking is simplified if he uses the notion of an unconscious frame as an explanatory principle; usually he goes further than this and infers its existence in the subject's unconscious."¹⁴

The psychological frame that identifies a figure against a ground, or a pattern to a constant flux of sensory impressions, often snaps into place all at once. This "click of recognition" is what Lacan refers to with Köhler's term, "*Aha Erlebnis*" (Aha experience), in his discussion of the infant's discovery of a more perfect whole in the image of an Other or the reflected image of itself during the mirror stage.¹⁵ The "click" or "Aha" yields a conceptual frame that provides a category and a boundary. The "Aha" moment establishes a signifying unit—the event, in this case—of a conceptual order different from any of its constituent signifiers. This unit then stands ready, like the functions of Vladimir Propp or the actions of Barthes, to take on its full measure of meaning through syntagmatic linkage with other units, other events, which brings its own "click of recognition" as we recognize the transformation from chronological to story time.¹⁶

FRAMES AND FETISHES

This process of recognizing a frame or gestalt assigns wholeness and boundaries to elements that do not intrinsically possess such qualities, even

though the sense of coherence seems inextricable from them.¹⁷ When Lacan discusses the gestalt image of a coherent, powerful Other that characterizes the mirror stage, for example, he makes clear that the Other does not, in fact, possess such qualities. The search for coherence and wholeness signifies the work of desire, where we construct a "*mise-en-scène* of desire"¹⁸ on which individual or collective dramas play out.

The impression of a coherent gestalt amounts to an overvaluation or misrecognition. The "click of recognition," the "*Aha Erlebnis*," snaps a sense of meaning or identity into place, be it to events or the self. This, as Lacan noted, simultaneously effects a destabilization. The subject constituted by this process imagines a coherence and autonomy for itself that is, in fact, dependent on an image of others that is, in a profound sense, imaginary. The overvaluation of wholeness and coherence goes hand in hand with a disavowal of partiality and fragmentation. When we overvalue, we fetishize.

Eric Santer proposes a distinction between the work of mourning and narrative fetishism:

By narrative fetishism I mean the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place. . . . [It contrasts with the work of mourning in that] narrative fetishism . . . is the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. Narrative fetishism releases one from the burden of having to reconstitute one's self-identity under "posttraumatic" conditions; in narrative fetishism, the "post" is indefinitely postponed.¹⁹

Mourning begins with the acknowledgment of trauma and proceeds to work through its destabilizing effect on the psyche. Narrative fetishism, by contrast, begins with the disavowal of trauma and any destabilizing effect it might have. For historical events, narrative fetishism provides meaningfulness to events just as the mirror stage provides identity to the self. Coherence persists because loss comes from somewhere beyond the domain of imaginary intactness. This is a story of loss that identifies traumatic events as coming from *outside* the boundaries of culture and society, the field of social relations in which we constitute our own identity. This fetishism cannot be recognized for what it is, a fantastic story of disavowed trauma, and still achieve the desired effect. Its own origin outside the field of trauma, in the realm of myth or ideology, must be disavowed. This is a

political strategy, a choice of one among numerous choices but one that has played itself out to a considerable degree both in news coverage by domestic media and in foreign policy by the federal government.

Mourning has certainly occurred for the trauma of September 11, but the bulk of the subsequent political response and media coverage displays more of the characteristics of narrative fetishism than of mourning, especially through its focus on presidential action and a fantasy of an invincible, implacable America that will remain intact to the extent that the villainous enemies (the site and origin of loss) are located in the radical "elsewhere" of a presumably alien religious fanaticism and nihilistic political philosophy beyond the bounds of culture, society, and even civilization.

Terrorism instills fear. It signals sudden, abrupt, catastrophic, barbaric, and traumatic acts that lie beyond the pale of law, reason, or judgment.²⁰ To the mind of the terrorist who is so constructed, the social order he opposes appears as obdurate, unyielding, impenetrable, and overwhelming—beyond the pale. No dialogue is possible, no warnings necessary, and no larger strategy than terror itself required. Terrorism confronts a "barbaric" enemy, an alien foe, an evil empire beyond the law of those beyond the Law. The only response conceivable is eradication; the only action possible is terrorism. Civilization condemns the terrorist to those very acts that exile him to beyond the pale, beyond the civilization that has itself constructed this barbaric figure and in which it can effect a negative identification with its own values and beliefs.

Naming the 9/11 event a terrorist act by Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network clearly affirms the intactness of a sovereign, benign identity for the United States and locates the origin of terror decisively elsewhere, in a realm of antidemocratic, anticapitalist, fundamentalist fanaticism. It simultaneously disavows the complicity that might be understood to follow from the history of U.S. foreign intervention—often military or paramilitary assistance in Latin America, Africa, and Asia—and, in this case, support of the ultraconservative Saudi Arabian royal family and the perceived degradation of honorable Saudi values by figures such as Bin Laden himself.

Disavowed, and subject to narrative fetishization, terrorism facilitates the misrecognition of its quasi-legitimate counterpart, state terrorism. State terrorism as a covert implementation of power favors (1) invisibility (as embodied in the Nazi policy of *Nacht und Nebel* [night and fog] or the Argentine government's policy of "disappearing" suspected dissidents), (2) masking of overt signs of torture, (3) absence of an identifiable subject to whom accountability can be assigned, and (4) cultivation of a state of

diffuse anxiety by dissolving any sense of specific events back into a general condition or situation through denial or disinformation. Nonstate-defined terrorism such as the attacks of 9/11 contests state power by turning this sense of powerlessness back on the state itself. It relies on (1) visibility (violence is less strategic, as it would be in a revolutionary movement, than dramaturgical), (2) overt violence—from 9/11 to beheadings—staged as spectacle, using the mainstream media to propagate its disregard for any “rules of engagement” or “human rights,” (3) identifiable perpetrators of the immediate event who assume accountability for the deed (to the point of becoming, as in the case of suicide bombers or the 9/11 hijackers, indecipherable apart from the event), and (4) the cultivation of a widespread state of immediate shock and persistent fear brought to a focus by media coverage.

In *The Believer* (Henry Bean, 2001) the anti-Semitic Jew Daniel confides to several people that he wants to kill a Jew. The self-proclaimed fascist Curtis asks him how, and Daniel answers: “on a New York City street, midday, with a small-caliber automatic, without a silencer.” A young woman, Carla, asks, “Why no silencer?” And Daniel responds: “You want it to be an event.”

And in the documentary film *One Day in September*, one of the surviving terrorists from the capture of the Israeli Olympic team as hostages at the Munich Olympics, Jamal Al Gashey, proclaims, at a news conference, “I’m proud of what I did at Munich because it helped the Palestinian cause enormously. Before Munich the world had no idea about our struggle, but on that day the name ‘Palestine’ was repeated all over the world.” Al Gashey fantasizes that this incomprehensible distortion of the usual process of nation-building achieves terrorist goals in a way that no state-sponsored act of terror would ever dream of doing.

FETISHISM AND FANTASY

Fetishes are fantastic, but, even more, their construction follows the path established by fantasy itself. As a framing device, the “terrorist event” has served to assert mastery over trauma by situating the origin, if not the site, of loss elsewhere and vowing to bring the site of loss home to the enemy. The dominant narrative of fiendish terrorists beyond the law and any human values has pushed attention beyond the traumatic event and the work of mourning. The mise-en-scène of desire constructs an enemy wholly alien and utterly inhuman. The task taken up by such narrative fetishism is well described by Freud: “[Following a trauma] there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being

flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem [rather than self-defense] arises instead—the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in a psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.”²¹ Disposition, for Freud, meant mourning, in a successful case, and melancholic neuroses in unsuccessful ones. In relation to 9/11 the flood of stimuli that overwhelmed us became framed and narrativized as a fantasmatic fetishization of something utterly alien and absolutely reprehensible rather than mourned as trauma. This disposition becomes, for the subject who believes it and on the level of the *unconscious* mechanism of fantasy propelling it, real, regardless of whether the occurrences narrativized belong to the imagination or history.²²

What betrays the fantasmatic dimension to the “terrorist event,” as the dominant narrative of our government and media have termed it, lies in the narrative of its wholly foreign origin. Trauma registers as all the more shocking and inexplicable. Innocence has gone unprotected. Something sacred has been defiled. Mourning seeks to find a way to conciliate profound trauma with its absence of moral, political, or social meaning. Narrative fetishism, however, launches a story that converts catastrophe to evil, trauma to crime. It moralizes in the name of the Law and the beleaguered nation-state that embodies it. The crime bears resemblance to the miscegenation at the root of Freud’s analogy about fetishism; the penetration of an alien race into our midst has betrayed itself by the disaster it has wreaked.²³

FANTASY CONTINUED: THE DOER OF THE DEED

Given that experience often arrives in a way that defies our desire for bounded coherence and recognizable form such as that which a story provides, what would we see if we confronted the gaps and contradictions, the incoherencies and fragmentations that elude meaning—a ground without figure, strewn with the remains of the referent? Do these gaps and contradictions attest to a genuine incoherence to occurrences themselves? What process of disavowal or fetishization do different processes of bestowing meaning entail?²⁴

When we see more in what we overvalue or fetishize than is there to be seen, we enter into a realm of fantasy, which is tightly tied to the real, not isolated in a private world of reverie. To speak of fantasy is not to speak of pure acts of imagination or visual fallacy alone but of a process integral to our relation to reality itself. To protect private fantasy from the clutches of the Law may belong to a liberal tradition, but, as the authors of *Formations*

of *Fantasy* argue, "the imperative to maintain this particular limit to the jurisdiction of the state has no doubt contributed to that climate of hostility which today prevails, on the democratic left, against *any* consideration of psychology in connection with the political. One consequence (perhaps most conspicuously displayed in the consistent failure of the left to understand nationalism) has been that the mobilizing force of *fantasy* has been effectively ceded to the right."²⁵ In fact, if videotapes broadcast by the news media are to be believed, Osama bin Laden and his followers sought to realize a plot partially based on a fantasy in which the devastation of the World Trade Center would prove paramount to the destruction of Western capitalism and culture as a whole. The terrorist fantasy utilized this particular site to stage the *mise-en-scène* of a murderous desire.

Large psychic investments are at work here. The stories encouraging individuals to "dispose of" a traumatic event prompt subjects to one course of action rather than another. The social rituals of mourning facilitate emotional confrontation and the resolution of trauma, but the government's narrative gives priority to the destruction of the distant cause of this grievous attack and to seek out those "striking features" (fanaticism, secretive-ness, isolation, mysterious sources of funds, and so on, even, for some "Arabness" of any kind) that "betray" a terrorist intent. The mainstream media and the Bush administration created an unfinished story—so far, fifteen years later—of terrorism. This tale offers a vantage point from which the event's origin can be identified and a vanishing point toward which the event recedes ("elsewhere").

Such a picture locates an agent or subject "behind" the event, as he from whom it issues. If it did not come out of nothing, it must have arisen from something or someone. That something in this case is the subject, an imaginary coherence but one necessary to the assignment of responsibility. To recognize such a subject—Osama bin Laden, the Al Qaeda network, or, more recently, other similar groups—as the one responsible nullifies the sense of traumatic meaninglessness by assigning, paradoxically, an *agent* to meaninglessness.

Recognizing the identifiable figure of the terrorist, and naming him, provides a doer for the deed. As such it reinstates the rule of law in the midst of an event that would seem to originate from a locus beyond the law. "A being is hurt, and the vocabulary that emerges to moralize that pain is one which isolates a subject as the intentional originator of an injurious deed. . . . The subject is not only fabricated as the prior and causal origin of a painful effect that is recast as an injury, but the action whose effects are injurious is no longer an action, the continuous present of 'a doing,' [what

I have termed occurrences] but is reduced to a 'singular act.'" Furthermore, "the subject appears only as a consequence of a demand for accountability; a set of painful effects is taken up by a moral framework that seeks to isolate the 'cause' of those effects in a singular and intentional agent, a moral framework that operates through a certain economy of paranoid fabrication and efficiency"²⁶

Trauma converts to injury, and injury requires redress; redress demands we produce the subject responsible. The *mise-en-scène* of desire conjures up the terrorist as the evildoer of the deed. The continuous present of "a doing" that would diffuse responsibility and acknowledge trauma collapses into a singular enemy, one whose status challenges the very law that calls it into being. The Bush administration's term for captives at the Guantanamo military base in Cuba, "unlawful combatants," identifies a subject accountable for injurious deeds, but it also locates this subject beyond the very law that calls such a subject into being. Accused criminals, like prisoners of war, remain subjects of the law, protected by those guarantees accorded to all citizens or soldiers. "Unlawful combatants," like undocumented guest workers, illegal immigrants, and the inhabitants of refugee camps, exist beyond the law. Special rules apply. They occupy a liminal space that justifies extraordinary measures, beyond the customary rule of law in order to preserve the rule of law, protect the peace, and maintain order.

The fantastic process embodied in the mirror stage returns as a political process of "othering." Slavoj Žižek puts it this way: "In short, 'enemy recognition' is always a performative procedure which brings to light/constructs the enemy's 'true face.' [Carl] Schmitt refers to the Kantian category of *Einbildungskraft*, the transcendental power of imagination: in order to recognize the enemy, one has to 'schematize' the logical figure of the Enemy, providing it with the concrete features which will make it into an appropriate target of hatred and struggle."²⁷

The name *terrorism* gives a face and a figure to the excess that typically escapes the categories of history, narrative, and meaning. We can address our future intentions toward that figure to which we assign responsibility for the unconscionable in the very moment when we misrecognize this figure ("elsewhere") as an agent of history. And we can justify forms of recourse that exceed the rule of law or the conventions of war since that which we oppose occupies a liminal space between the human and inhuman. In other words, the law requires fantasy as a vital fiction. It requires a *mise-en-scène* of desire populated by those subjects on whom it can exercise its power and whom it can hold responsible, even in their capacity as excess.²⁸

What is at stake is not whether specific terrorists mounted the attacks of September 11 but whether the form of narrativization given to the event by the Bush administration misrecognizes the fantasy involved by individuating the doer and singularizing the act, by segregating the doer and the deed out from a continuous stream of historical "doings" and consequences, and by constructing a special entity, the terrorist, from whom stems the rejection of law, the nullification of being, and the rule of terror.

THE TERRORIST FANTASY

The "remains of the day," 9/11, lie strewn with the latent fragments of a narrative, if only they can be assembled into one. "Attack on America," "Terrorism," and "America Strikes Back" give name to the three-part story that unfolds. Like other events of catastrophic proportion that result from the conjunction of technology, determination, and evil, this event raises the question of whether any narrative frame can prove adequate. Modernist events—of which the Holocaust is the most paradigmatic for many commentators but which can also include other campaigns of genocide or ethnic cleansing; nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare; mass starvation; and terrorism—poses a distinct challenge to narrative representation.²⁹ To stay with our specific example, *terrorism* names the unfathomable. Terrorism assigns human agency to that which exceeds the bounds of civilized (human) conduct. It converts to history that which defies the premise of historical meaningfulness. It freezes a traumatic moment into a mythic binary of Manichean struggle: them/us, love/hate, good/evil; civilization/barbarism. ("You are either with us or against us," as President Bush put it.) The melodramatics of terrorism enable a narrative production in which a purely benign state strikes out against a totally malevolent enemy.

This particular story of a profoundly uncivilized and un-American terrorism alleviates the event of its sting, and mystery, by disavowing its full traumatic impact. This story also disavows the painful effects of injustice and exploitation, of economic dependence and cultural hegemony on the peoples of other nations and other values. It favors a fantasmatic scenario that reduces terrorism to a unilateral act of cold-blooded violence that comes out of an unfathomable void, a heart of total darkness.

Like *unlawful combatant*, the term *barbaric agent* bears an oxymoronic ring. Historical narratives require human agents—be they individual or collective. Human agents are those that possess a conscience and stand morally responsible for their actions. Yet terrorism stands for unconscious emanations of hate and violence beyond the pale of law or reason. How can the

terrorist be assigned responsibility when, by definition, he or she exemplifies the one who acts unconscionably? How can we think we recognize a familiar historical agent of any kind in the terrorist? Modernist events in all their guises, including terrorism, continue to call for narratives of cause/effect, agent/action, yet their technologically amplified magnitude compels such narratives to betray their own "special features" as alien impositions on that which defies the categories and representations of traditional narratives or a moral human order.

It is little wonder that the first extended reexamination of the events of September 11 on network television was a two-hour special, *9/11*, broadcast on CBS on the six-month anniversary of the event and organized around the footage of a pair of independent documentary filmmakers from France, the Gaudet brothers.³⁰ The filmmakers began their film, on the everyday life of a New York City fireman, in the months before September 11, but they found their fireman, and themselves, swept up in the maelstrom of the event itself. Their efforts took them inside the World Trade Center buildings and captured the collapse of the towers. It observed the extraordinary conduct of their hero and his comrades as they risked their own lives to save others, not knowing at the time what had happened in any detail or how acute the risks actually were.

Heroic firemen made an understandable choice for a focus. Such figures come closest to the human agents of old. They, both during and in the aftermath of the event, afforded a way of "indexing the irruption of fate, destiny, grace, fortune, providence and even of 'history' itself into a life" to yield meaning. The fantasmatics of melodrama recur. As their hero fireman says regarding his choice of profession, "I just wanted to do good with my life." It is no wonder Americans have seized on these men and women as heroes in a classic and profound sense (and rightly so). They offer linkage to a past tradition of courage and sacrifice, and they restore some shards of meaning to a landscape denuded of the significance it had once been made to bear.

Evil, however, is entirely elsewhere. It comes out of nothingness, out of that which lies beyond the pale of democratic institutions and civil society. It occupies no place in the documentary tribute to sacrifice and heroism, as if it cannot be accounted for within the same narrative frame. The film *9/11* is the story of heroism on the scene of disaster rather than of crime and punishment in its aftermath.

The story of "terrorism" eradicates the mythic story of heroic endeavor in favor of a fantastic story of moral triumph over absolute evil. What Leslie Stahl reported in 1985, as "a pattern of terrorism which [the government] believe[s] may be an attempt to test the will of . . . the American

people" requires no concrete referent. A permanent state of Manichean struggle prevails: the national continues to be tested; evil terrorists and good Americans continue to confront each other across the chasm between history and society, on the one hand, and eternal evil, on the other. Attention turns to the crusade ahead and away from the iterative pattern of occurrences in which the complicity of state power would replace the innocence of human goodness, the continuous process of doing that understands the specification of an event as a work of fantasy. Civilization disavows association with the ground of barbarism from which it must consistently stand out. It directs attention to a future time populated by revenge, triumph, retribution, and memorialization. "Terrorism" allows "civilization" to reassert itself as its diametric opposite. Once so named, the event carries forward the paradoxical logic of a fantasy in which the nation strives to eradicate that which simultaneously belongs to the ground of its own being.