THE ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

Matthew Gumpert

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THINKING WHAT'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING!
Series Editor: Jalal Toufic

— Jalal Toufic, *The Dancer's Two Bodies*
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SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Series: **Thinking What's Thought-Provoking!**

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THINKING WHAT'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING!

What is thought-provoking? It would seem that one should be able to easily and straightforwardly answer: what provokes thought (or that concerning which a psychotic or schizophrenic could at some point feel *theft of thought*). In which case, if no thought is provoked, and ends up being produced, then what we assumed to be thought-provoking (for example, the atomic bomb) would turn out not to be thought-provoking (Gertrude Stein: "They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared … and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting"[1])—unless its failure to provoke thought were to strike us as a thought-provoking anomaly and paradox (Heidegger: "*Most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking*—not even yet, although the state of the world is becoming constantly more thought-provoking"[2]). What is most thought-provoking may be the following conjunction: some thing or happening that most people assume and declare to be thought-provoking *even while continuing to be thoughtless* is said by some thoughtful writer or thinker, who is "a great deal more reliable in his

diagnosis than most,"[3] not to be actually thought-provoking; *and yet* the absence of a provocation of thought with regard to it is experienced as anomalous and paradoxical by, and provokes further thought in some other thinker and/or the birth of thought in a previously thoughtless person.

A substantial number of the videos, installations, and paintings said to be thought-provoking nonetheless do not provoke thought in the artist who made them—as well as in most if not all others. How to account for this anomaly? Would the persistence of thoughtlessness on the part of the one who made a reportedly thought-provoking work indicate that the latter was not actually thought-provoking? Are some if not most of those reputed to have made thought-provoking artworks, to which they were exposed at least while making them if not following their premiere or publication or launch, refractory or immune to thought, doomed to thoughtlessness, seeing that they persist in being thoughtless? Or have we not left yet or resumed living in an age where what is "*most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking* … although the state of the world is becoming constantly more thought-provoking"[4]? As the editor of the book series "Thinking What's Thought-Provoking!" published by Sharjah Art Foundation, I wish to, among others things, contribute to decreasing the number of artists whose *persistent* thoughtlessness

may *occasionally* draw from a thinker the impulsive and futile protest, "Think, you thoughtless thought-provoking artist!" through making some of them self-reflexive thoughtful thought-provoking artists, ones who are themselves provoked into thinking by their thought-provoking work.[5] In order for those who are paradoxically not provoked into thinking even by what is thought-provoking, for example, the results of the double-slit experiment, the Shoah, Resnais/Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour*, or the "*most thought-provoking … that we* [including the author of the quote, Heidegger] *are still not thinking* … although the state of the world is becoming constantly more thought-provoking," they would have to be initiated into thought. Given that, with the exception of those who died before physically dying; the rare pubescent girls whose portraits were made;[6] and those whose movement projected them as subtle dancers into the dance realm, with its altered bodies, movement, space, time, music, and silence,[7] there is so little initiation in this period that is to a large extent oblivious if not averse to it, initiation into thought is also largely an initiation into initiation. How rare is (the encounter with) thought, and hence how rare, for thoughtless people, is the experience of the rarity of thought! While this rarity is the daily experience of thinkers (Deleuze: "Having an idea is a rare event, it is a kind of celebration"[8]),[9] it is *fundamentally* encountered in

an initiation into thought, since thought occurs then—enfolded—for a fleeting interval between the surprised stark realization, "I've never thought before!" and the panicked apprehension, "I am on the verge of being submerged by a vertiginous and seemingly infinite extension of thought as well as by an excessive rapidity and proliferation of evanescent associations between these thoughts, with the consequence that I will not be able to catch up with, let alone accompany any of these thoughts and their associations, thus missing boundless riches." The initiate may later feel fairly relieved that many if not all of the obscurely sensed thoughts were enfolded in the incredibly dense fleeting interval between "I've never thought before!" and "I will imminently be both blown away and stupefied by the just began *thought inflation*,[10]"[11] and can later be unfolded *creatively*; it is in this sense that, during thought-initiation, thought is largely if not fully the promise of thought. While the unfolding of what was enfolded during the thought-initiation can only be done creatively, the latter, expect if repressed, has already radically altered the intuition of the thought initiate, guides him or her obscurely, that is, not through knowing explicitly what was enfolded during the initiation, but through feeling what it is not ("That's not it!"). Are there thought-initiating and not just thought-provoking books, artworks, films?[12] For that to be the case, the book, artwork, or film

has to have resulted from an initiation into thought, and its maker has to have transmitted, whether intentionally or unconsciously, to the receiver not this or that explicit thought but the enfolded "food for thought" and thoughts whose creative unfolding may otherwise remain outstanding. Nicolas Abraham writes in his "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology" (1975), "The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent's unconscious to the child's...."[13] What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others"[14]; I would say in relation to initiation into thought, "What haunts are ... the gaps, in the form of enfolded thoughts and 'food for thought,' left within the one who was initiated into thought and then passed from the latter to the reader's or spectator's unconscious." It is in the process of unfolding creatively one of these enfolded thoughts that the reader or spectator, now functioning as a writer, filmmaker, artist, or musician, undergoes the complementary two moments of the initiation process: "I've never thought before!" and "I will imminently be both blown away and stupefied by a *thought inflation*." A thinker is someone who was initiated into thought; unfolded creatively at least one thought among the seemingly countless ones that were received, enfolded, in his initiation into thought;[15]

transmitted to the receiver of his or her work not only this or that thought that he received in his initiation into thought and that he subsequently unfolded creatively, but also those still enfolded thoughts and "food for thought" whose creative unfolding may otherwise remain outstanding, thus implanting in the receiver one of the conditions of initiation into thought; and produced thought-provoking thoughts regarding something thought-provoking. This series hopes to include not only thought-provoking thought regarding what's thought-provoking, but also at least one book that is (not only thought-provoking but also) thought-initiating—only once this initiation into thought is gone through does what is thought-provoking usually if not ineluctably lead to thought.

Jalal Toufic, Series Editor

1 Gertrude Stein, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), first published in *Yale Poetry Review*, December 1947, http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-atom-bomb.html.

2 Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 4.

3 That is how the doctor is described in Maurice Blanchot's *Death Sentence*.

4 Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 4.

5 If a thoughtful artist is to include thought in his work, he or she should, like the thinker, include mostly if not only thoughts that happen to be thought-provoking (for thought, alas, is not always itself thought-provoking)—and/or thought-initiating.

6 "The successful portrait of a pubescent girl is not a rite of passage but a rite of non-passage; what needs a rite is not passage, which is the natural state (at least for historical societies), but non-passage, the radical differentiation between the before, in this case a pubescent girl, and the after, a woman. In this era, initiation, which, with rare exceptions, no longer happens in the world, has, with all the dangers it entails, to happen through the portrait. Unlike so many other pubescent girls who could not wait to become young women, early on imitating their mothers or elder sisters in mannerisms and makeup, she intuited that for her not to be falsely replaced by an imposter claiming to be her at an older age, she had to get a valid portrait or else to commit suicide—the risk was that both would happen together, that in the process of the making of the portrait she would die (Poe's "The Oval Portrait") because the portrait was being

made through a transference of her life to it. Through her portrait, the pubescent girl resists her (mis)representation by the woman who would otherwise assume her name and lay claim to her memories in a few years, for the pubescent girl's portrait differentiates her not only from other people but also, radically, from that woman. The successful portrait of the pubescent girl must be recognizable to her and unrecognizable to the woman who would otherwise assume her name, must resist oblivion regarding her and produce oblivion for the woman who would otherwise lay claim to her memories." Jalal Toufic, *The Portrait of the Pubescent Girl: A Rite of Non-Passage* (Forthcoming Books, 2011; available for download as a PDF file at: http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Portrait_of_the_Pubescent_Girl,_A_Rite_of_Non-Passage.pdf), 23–24.

7 "Is it surprising that while putting on makeup in preparation for the dance, which will project a subtle version of each of them in its realm of altered movement, space, and time, dancers often surround themselves with tokens of their identity, for example, their photos, their reflections in the mirror, and some of their cherished belongings, and talk about their memories and projects? Such seemingly redundant assertions of identity and mentions of future plans often signal an apprehension that a threshold to a condition in which they may no longer have access to these is imminent" (Jalal Toufic, *The Dancer's Two Bodies* [Sharjah, UAE: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2015; available for download as a PDF file at: http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads.htm], 10).

8 "What Is the Creative Act?" in Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, edited by David Lapoujade, translated by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by MIT Press, 2006), 312.

9 The rarity of thought is the daily experience even of fertile thinkers, for example, Nietzsche; indeed even of those who "cannot stop thinking," whether or not because they believe, as they live the "I am thinking, therefore I exist" (Descartes) not as an abstract proposition or argument but as an existential condition, that were they to stop thinking they would thereby cease existing. The rarity of thought is the daily experience of any thinker because there is a radical blank, whether implicit or, in the case of aphoristic thinkers, explicit, between any two thoughts, one that *may* go on for eleven years or indefinitely.

10 *Thought inflation* accords well with and evokes *cosmological inflation*. "Cosmological inflation, the hypothesis that the early Universe underwent an extremely rapid expansion, is a popular paradigm in modern cosmology.... In the 1980s, [Alan] Guth, [Andrei] Linde, [Andreas] Albrecht, and [Paul] Steinhardt proposed the theory of cosmological inflation to explain two puzzles in the big bang model of cosmology: why our Universe is approximately flat (i.e., it can be described as a Euclidian space, with a vanishingly small curvature) and why very distant regions in our Universe appear to have a nonrandom correlation in their temperatures (which suggests they were once causally connected).... Many models of inflation exist ..." (Parampreet Singh, "A Glance

at the Earliest Universe," *Physics* 5, 142 [2012], http://link.aps.org/doi/10.1103/Physics.5.142). "Inflation was both rapid and strong. It increased the linear size of the universe by more than 60 'e-folds,' or a factor of ~10^26 in only a small fraction of a second!" (http://wmap.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_cosmo_infl.html).

11 The enfolding in the initiation into thought of countless thoughts in the fleeting interval between "I've never thought before!" and "I will imminently be both blown away and stupefied by the just began thought inflation" is one of the greatest if not the greatest experience of condensation, overshadowing by far even the one, functioning partly differently, that we have in dreams ("The first achievement of the dream-work is *condensation*. By that we understand the fact that the manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent one, and is thus an abbreviated translation of it.... You will have no difficulty in recalling instances from your own dreams of different people being condensed into a single one. A composite figure of this kind may look like A perhaps, but may be dressed like B, may do something that we remember C doing, and at the same time we may know that he is D. This composite structure is of course emphasizing something that the four people have in common.... In regard to the connection between the latent and the manifest dream ... a manifest element may correspond simultaneously to several latent ones, and, contrariwise, a latent element may play a part in several manifest ones ..." Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, translated and edited by James Strachey; with a biographical introduction by Peter Gay [New York: Norton, 1989], 210–211 and 213).

12 Here's a kindred question: Can reading a book, watching a film, or looking at an artwork be an initiation into death (before physically dying), induce the reader's or spectator's dying before physically dying? In other words, can someone on reading a book "find" "himself" lost "in" labyrinthine space and time, witness immobilized people, etc., so that he ends up exclaiming, "I must be dead!"? Is there some reader who dates not so much his questioning whether he is dead before physically dying but his dying before physically dying from reading my book *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (1993; revised and expanded edition, 2003)? If there is someone who died before physically dying on reading my book *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, then he or she would thus have become aware that he or she is already dead even while he or she lives, indeed that throughout his or her life he or she was conjointly dead, indeed that he or she was *always* dead ("'Die before you die' [in Islam these words are attributed to the prophet Muhammad] is not to be taken as implying that if you do not do so you will be solely alive until you die [physically], but is rather to be understood to mean: do so in order to become aware that you are a mortal, that you are anyway dead while alive whatever you do" (Jalal Toufic, *What Were You Thinking?* [Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2011], 181n60).

13 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1, edited, translated, and with

an introduction by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 173.

14 Ibid., 171.

15 Here's my version of Heidegger's "Every thinker thinks one only thought.... And for the thinker the difficulty is to hold fast to this one only thought as the one and only thing that he must think ..." (Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 50): "Every thinker thinks, through a process of creative unfolding, *at least one* thought among the seemingly countless ones that were received, enfolded, in his or her initiation into thought.... And for the thinker the difficulty is to hold fast to creatively unfolding *at least one* thought among the seemingly countless ones received, enfolded, in his or her initiation into thought—once he or she has accomplished this, some if not all of his or her other thoughts may be triggered by thought-provoking works by others, experiments, or events, ones bearing no direct relation to his or her initiation (some people forget their initiation into thought or allow it to be repressed until they encounter a thought-provoking artwork, book, experiment, or event, which reawakens that more radical experience; then it may very well happen that instead of thinking regarding that provocative work, book, experiment, or event, they resume trying to creatively unfold what was enfolded during the initiation).

BOOKS BY MATTHEW GUMPERT

— *The End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe*
(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012)
— *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past*
(University of Wisconsin Press, 2001)

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CONTENTS

It's the end of the world as we know it.
It's the end of the world as we know it.
It's the end of the world as we know it
and I feel fine.
— R.E.M., "It's the End of the World as
We Know It (And I Feel Fine)"

PRELIMINARY TECHNICAL REMARKS

i. All translations are by author unless otherwise noted.

ii. For all texts in a foreign language I supply both the original and translated versions wherever I deem the difference between the two to be significant.

iii. In general I supply both the original and translated versions of the titles of works, except where it has become standard practice to refer to the work by either its original or translated form.

iv. All classical Greek definitions are taken from H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (referred to as "Liddell and Scott"), unless otherwise stated. All Latin definitions are from Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (referred to as "Lewis and Short"), unless otherwise stated.

v. Throughout this text I use *Classical* to refer to a particular historical period, that which follows the Archaic and precedes the Hellenistic. I use *classical*, on the other hand, generically, as the equivalent of *ancient Greek and/or Roman*.

CATASTROPHE AS ACCIDENT: THE REVELATION OF THE SIGN

Catastrophe arrives, traditionally, in the manner of an *accident*: from the Latin *accidens*, meaning *accident* or *chance*;[1] from *accido*, *to fall out*, *come to pass*, *happen*, *occur*.[2] The accident is, in short, *that which happens to us*: it comes from without, and takes us by surprise.[3] "We are passive with respect to the disaster," writes Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "but the disaster is perhaps passivity" (3; trans. Smock).[4] To experience catastrophe is to enter into the condition of passivity. This passivity is directly linked to the externality of the catastrophe: that it appears to arrive from outside the system. That we are not just *passive with respect to* the catastrophe, but *surprised by it*, follows necessarily, I have said, from this externality, but also from the peculiar relation of catastrophe to temporality: for it is not enough to say that the catastrophe happens *swiftly* or *suddenly*: the catastrophe, rather, is *a suspension of temporality itself*. As accident, the

catastrophe is a *rupture* in the ordinary scheme of things, or one of the many modalities thereof: an *irruption*, an *eruption*, a *disruption*; let us say, finally, an *interruption*.[5]

Passivity, like surprise, is an attribute of ignorance. But in the experience of catastrophe, ignorance, paradoxically, is a form of knowledge. The catastrophe is not that which exposes the limits of human knowledge; it is the evacuation or transcendence of knowledge, the access to a knowledge beyond knowledge: an *ecstatic* event. In its irruptive or eruptive aspect, the catastrophe takes on the form of a luminous presence: that which was external is now internal; *that* which arrived—or was sent—from without is now within, is now here, is now present. But what is this *that*? *What* is made present, *what* is revealed, in the advent of the catastrophe? The catastrophe is utterly meaningless, it lies beyond the realm of human apprehension and control. And yet it is precisely because accidents seem to happen for no determinable reason that, by the very same token, they seem to point to a reason, one beyond our fathoming. And so catastrophe becomes a sign of the transcendent; it belongs to the genre of the revelatory, or the *apocalyptic*. The revelatory is that which appears to surpass the semiotic: for in it the evacuation of all meaning coincides with its absolute plenitude.

Before the second plane made its appearance on the scene, the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 seemed, for many, to possess this revelatory quality of the accident. Just another morning in Manhattan, cleaved by the irruption—sudden, inexplicable, absurd—of violence on an unimaginable scale.[6] (Later, too, even after explanations had been offered and intentionalities determined, the public and the press continued to speak of 9/11 in epiphanic terms: as the unleashing of an unholy evil upon the land, an invasion of the sacred territory of the nation by an invisible enemy, a transcendent violence severing past from present.[7]) That 9/11 was the spectacular work of a murderous intentionality, and the realization of a carefully scripted plot, is immaterial here: what is important is that it possesses the form of an accident; indeed, that it was a successful plot was due, in no small part, to the fact that it was carefully designed to look like an accident. I am speaking, of course, of the first plane. The second plane, whose trajectory so neatly mirrors that of the first, thereby makes a mockery of its accidentality.

All great catastrophes present this form: that of a sudden suspension of everyday life. Catastrophe is that which wakes us up from the dream, now revealed as counterfeit, of the ordinary. Pearl Harbor is remembered as a sudden *assault* upon a tranquil

morning,[8] and a wake-up call for a nation.[9] The assassination of John F. Kennedy was experienced as an *interruption*: the unencumbered passage of just another November day in Dallas, Texas, the stately procession of a motorcade across Dealey Plaza—cut short by the bullet of the assassin.[10]

But in a number of significant respects 9/11 is different from these prior catastrophes with which it is reflexively compared.[11] Pearl Harbor and the assassination of Kennedy represented classic assaults upon targets either strategic or synecdochic (or both), by way of extraordinary instruments whose express purpose is the destruction of human life. Part of what made 9/11 so traumatic, in contrast, was that its target was the *ordinary* citizen (the term *terrorism* has been reserved, precisely, for a form of violence that refuses to make distinctions between *extraordinary* and *ordinary* citizens, between legitimate and illegitimate targets) or, if one will, an *ordinary* building, and even, more significantly, that it achieved the destruction of that target through the most *ordinary* of instruments: that of a passenger airplane, one that appeared to have somehow lost control or strayed off course. 9/11 was thus a catastrophe achieved specifically through the mode of the accident; for the accident is that fate, after all, reserved for the ordinary citizen, passive, ignorant, and taken by surprise (and overtaken by events).

But 9/11 was staged not only to look like an accident, but also to expose that very act of staging; to reveal the accident itself (and by extension the accident in general) as a fraud. There were two planes on 9/11, after all, not one. All catastrophe, we have suggested, takes the form of a revelation; but 9/11 has this peculiarity, that it proffers two revelations, not one; the second revelation designed to reveal the duplicity of the first. 9/11, then, is both a catastrophe and a lesson in catastrophe, a meta-catastrophe; a dual or double event, one event and two events, a first event and a second event.

This second event is a reading of the first. In its revelation of the first event, which had appeared arbitrary, indifferent (remember Isidore of Seville on the accident in the *Books of Differences*), and meaningless (and thus transcendent in its meaning), as merely an event like any other (full of meaning in the most banal sense of the term, an effect of human intentionality and empirically verifiable causality), this reading (the reading that constitutes 9/11 itself) is a spectacular reminder of what we had already suspected: that all accidents are accidents only in appearance (their accidentality is an *accident* [*sumbebēkos*], we might say, borrowing the standard term, within the Greek philosophical tradition, for the attribute of an object as distinct from its essence), that *there are no accidents*.

The most indifferent object may turn against us when we least expect it. (This brings us back to the traditional target of the terrorist, the *innocent victim*. The terrorist is uniformly condemned for his refusal to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate targets. We leave aside the question, for the time being, of what constitutes a legitimate target. But such condemnation presupposes a moral framework that the terrorist, by virtue of being one, refuses to acknowledge. Terrorism ought to be regarded, rather, as the return, in the name of various ideological causes, to a radically deterministic point of view, one which represents the very basis of Attic tragedy, and from which ethics, in our modern sense of the term, is specifically excluded. From this essentially tragic point of view, all of us are potential victims, regardless of our innocence or guilt. We are grist for the mill, as it were, of a higher cause. And if there are no accidents, it follows, necessarily, that there are no innocent victims.) The ordinariness of the ordinary object is a screen, behind which lurks a mysterious causality, waiting to manifest itself. But this is as much to say that all *objects are accidents*, waiting, as it were, to happen. Indeed, all objects may be considered counterfeit signs, their banality a mere *accident*, one that masks a malevolent essentiality. This is, then, the epiphany of the second plane: that

the event itself (for that is what the first plane had seemed to be, the very image of that which simply happens, that which simply arrives[12]) *is an accident*; or, in more apocalyptic terms, that *the event itself is a catastrophe*.

In Paul Virilio's *The Accident of Art*, Sylvère Lotringer, referring to Virilio's 2003 exhibition "Unknown Quantity" at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, which contains footage of various catastrophes from Chernobyl to 9/11, and which Virilio himself calls a "blueprint" for a future "Museum of Accidents," asks if it is truly possible to exhibit the accident, because that which is "most horrifying may not even be perceptible" (93; trans. Taormina). This essay is, in some ways, a testament to that statement, focusing on catastrophe as the trivial, the banal, the everyday (Blanchot, again from *The Writing of the Disaster*: "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental" [3]). Virilio, however, regards this contagion of the accidental as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, an integral and necessary by-product of a culture based on *speed*, which is to say, *technology* (or the "acceleration of substance" [99]) and *information* (or "instantaneous communication" [98]). Virilio's argument may be reduced, finally, to this rather trivial proposition: the faster things move, the more likely they are to crash. Accompanied by this

corollary: the more likely things are to crash, the more we tend to assume they will, and the less surprised we are when they do: "When you work on speed, you work on accidents. Why? Because there is a loss of control. What is speed, what is acceleration? A loss of control and emotions just as much as a loss of transportation. A plane crashes out of control and crashes more surely the faster it is going" (98). It is difficult to disagree with Virilio's thesis, which amounts, in the end, to a rather old-fashioned critique of the tyranny of technology over the human, an argument cogently and convincingly popularized by films such as the *Matrix* series, and before that the *Terminator* series, and before that Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

To define technology thus, as a progressive acceleration, whether of substance or sense, is a dangerously narrow and literal approach; one that proves, I believe, fatally myopic. (One would have thought it a difficult approach to adopt, in any case, after Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*.) This is ironic, because Virilio's thesis is so explicitly tied to a rigorously historical progression. This is a regular feature of Virilio's methodology. Thus in *Crepuscular Dawn* Virilio argues that different historical eras have different "horizons of expectations" when it comes to catastrophe: since the eighteenth century we

have moved from the expectation of "The Great Revolution" to that of "The Great War," and now to "The Great Accident" (176–77; trans. Taormina). Like many of Virilio's assertions, this is too self-evident to be truly interesting; transposed out of its narrow, historicizing framework, however, it is illuminating. Is it possible that we have *always* lived in the Age of the Accident? Isn't this the hidden truth so spectacularly revealed by the events of 9/11? "Accidents," Lotringer asserts in *The Accident of Art*, "*used to be considered an exception*, something that shouldn't have happened and would take everyone by surprise. You see them on the contrary as something substantial, even rigorously necessary" (98; italics mine). But this is precisely wrong: accidents *used to be considered the norm*, something that could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. That is the underlying principle at work in classical tragedy; a principle Sophocles' Oedipus learns only when it is too late. That accidents are both substantial and rigorously necessary is something the Greeks knew well; it is we who have forgotten it. Human beings, the Greeks understood, have always been at the mercy of forces infinitely larger than and moving infinitely faster than them.

Virilio makes a crucial distinction in *The Accident of Art* between what he calls the *symbolic* and the *integral accident*, and offers the following

diachronic account tracing a trajectory from the former to the latter:

> We can no longer ignore the fact that in the 20th century we have gone from a symbolic local accident—the "Titanic" sinking somewhere in the North Atlantic, taking fifteen hundred people to the bottom—to a global accident like Chernobyl, or even what is taking place in genetics or elsewhere. We used to have *in situ* accidents, accidents that had particular, specific impacts; but now there are general accidents, in other words *integral* accidents, accidents that integrate other accidents just as Chernobyl continuously integrated the phenomenon of contamination.... With Chernobyl we had—but we could just as well use the example of the World Trade Center—a major accident. Why? Because it is a temporal accident.... And I would insist on this: interactivity is to information (in the fundamental sense of the word information) as radioactivity is to nature. (99–100)

Even a cursory glance at any work of Attic tragedy ought to be enough to suggest how specious this distinction is, like the historical narrative upon

which it depends. For tragedy is founded precisely upon the *integral* or *general* or *temporal* accident as Virilio defines it here. Oedipus' murder of Laius in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is both rigorously *in situ* and yet inexorably general, an accident that integrates other accidents. What destroys Oedipus, likewise, is the *interactivity* of *information*, which is regarded, through an archaic logic of purity and pollution, as a kind of natural radioactivity (and indeed, at the end of the *Oedipus*, the fallen Oedipus is as radioactive as a piece of plutonium, and must be cast forth with dispatch from the polis). Lotringer asserts: "The accident is no longer local, it is global and permanent, like the sinister satellites that keep orbiting the planet, or the drunken driver whom you quote ... 'I am an accident waiting to happen.' Accidents are bound to happen and the only question is when and where" (99). But what are the ancient gods, or the causal forces they themselves obey, but *sinister satellites orbiting the planet*? And what is Oedipus, to continue with the example of Classical tragedy, but *an accident waiting to happen*, an accident that happens on the road to Thebes, when Oedipus collides with Laius?

Virilio's work on the accident constitutes, in the end, a surprisingly conservative jeremiad on the wages to be paid for our technological sins. In today's world of "continuous catastrophic information"

(106), Virilio argues, what were formerly local events, exceptions to the rule, "have to be connected" to reach "a prospective knowledge of the threat": that "of our own power, of our arrogance" (106). Virilio expresses outrage at the hubris that constituted the building (as opposed to the destruction) of the World Trade Center: "It was extraordinary," he says "to build twelve hundred feet without a structure [that is to say, with no cement core; an omission that, he assures us, would not have been permitted in France], with a single steel weave. But this performance came at the price of an unprecedented catastrophe" (107).[13] Long before September 11, it was well known that the Twin Towers swayed violently in high winds. Sensors attached to the towers recorded the sounds they emitted in storms. "You can hear the suffering," Virilio comments. This suffering is, for Virilio, the new revelation of the accident. "Aristotle," Lotringer asserts, "thought that 'substance' was absolute and the accident relative. For you it is the reverse"; to which Virilio replies, rather more cautiously: "The accident reveals substance. We could replace the word reveal with the word apocalypse. The apocalypse is a revelation.[14] The accident is," therefore, "the apocalypse of substance, in other words, its revelation" (107).

But surely this is not a new revelation; indeed,

it is, I would suggest, a proper formulation of the Aristotelian position. Virilio sees the writing of disaster (to borrow again from Blanchot) as the signature of a new age; I would suggest it has always been the revelation of substance itself. Substance, I am arguing, for Aristotle as for Virilio, is that which must be tormented into revealing the truth. Indeed, the exigency of hermeneutics in the West is founded on precisely this, essentially Aristotelian premise. We live in a world of things, according to Aristotle, things whose very difference, the one from the other, is a pure accident; a recurrent catastrophe suffered by substance itself. The thing, for Aristotle, is thus a semiotic entity, and a revelatory substance: a veiled sign whose true identity must be teased out or tortured into actuality.

A brief return to Aristotle is perhaps in order. For Aristotle, one will recall, the accident is that which does not belong to the *essence* of a thing. "Essential attributes," Aristotle asserts in book 1, chapter 4 of the *Posterior Analytics*, are above all "such as belong to their subject as elements in an essential nature" (73a34–35; trans. Mure). Attributes that do not fulfill this condition Aristotle calls "accidents or 'coincidents'" (73b4). Aristotle continues in book 1, chapter 4 of the *Posterior Analytics*: "That is essential which is not predicated of a subject other than itself … whereas substance

... is not what it is in virtue of being something else besides. Things, then, not predicated of a subject I call *essential* [*kath' auta*]; things predicated of a subject I call *accidental* [*sumbebēkota*]" (73b5–10). This formulation is echoed in book 7, chapter 4 of the *Metaphysics*, when Aristotle asserts: "The essence of each thing is to be what is said to be *propter se*" (1029b14; trans. Ross).

We live, then, in a world of predication: a world in which objects are individuated or categorized with regard to their external attributes or accidents. Such predicates, Aristotle indicates in chapter 4 of the *Categories*, include expressions of "quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, or affection" (1b25–26; trans. Edghill). But substance itself, Aristotle asserts in chapter 5 of the *Categories*, "in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse" (2a11–13). (The categories which we predicate of true substance, or within which we include it, are for Aristotle substances only in a secondary sense.) It is because the attributes of an object are considered to *befall* it in the manner of an *accident* (in the common parlance), that they can be considered *accidents* (in the philosophical sense, i.e., *attributes*) in the first place. Thus, for Aristotle, the blueness of a chair, or the position of a bird (or

an airplane) in flight, is an accident. Things are what they are, or the way they are (which is to say, they belong to certain categories, they are distinct from one another), by way of accidents: infinitesimal catastrophes. Imagine, now, a world without distinctions, without categories, without predicates, without signs: a world without accidents. It is a fantasy that has seduced many a philosopher in the West; as it has many a paranoid schizophrenic, many a conspiracy theorist, and many a terrorist, for in the realm of paranoia, conspiracy, and terrorism, as in the noumenal realm of the metaphysician, there are no accidents.

But where, in the realm of the accident, to locate the essence of things? That this is, for Aristotle, a revelatory question is what Virilio seems to have forgotten; for it is, according to Aristotle, in the nature of things not to *be*, but to *become*; to reveal their nature through a process of actualization, or *entelechy* (*entelekheia*). All substance, Aristotle asserts in book 8, chapter 2 of the *Metaphysics*, can be said to exist in three ways: "one kind of it as matter, another as form or actuality, while the third kind is that which is composed of these two" (1043a28–29). By matter Aristotle refers, in book 8, chapter 1, to "that which, not being a 'this' actually, is potentially a 'this'" (1042a27–28). Of course in objects as we know them, form and matter are

combined: “The proximate matter and the form are one and the same thing, the one potentially, and the other actually … for each thing is a unity, and the potential and the actual are somehow one” (8.6, 1045b17–21).

That it is in the nature of all things to attain full being by moving from potentiality to actuality is, one can see, not only a teleological principle, but an apocalyptic one. In book 2, chapter 1 of *On the Soul* (*De anima*), Aristotle clarifies this principle: “We are in the habit of recognizing, as one determinate kind of what is, substance, and that in several senses, (a) in the sense of matter or that which in itself is not ‘a this,’ and (b) in the sense of form or essence, which is that precisely in virtue of which a thing is called ‘a this,’ and thirdly (c) in the sense of that which is compounded of both (a) and (b). Now matter is *potentiality* [*dunamis*], form *actuality* [*entelekheia*]; of the latter there are two grades related to one another as e.g. knowledge to the exercise of knowledge” (412a6–11; trans. Smith). *Entelechy* (often translated as *actualization* or *fulfillment*) is Aristotle’s term for that full being which exists potentially in all objects, and which drives the actualization of that potential. 9/11 looks as if it were designed precisely to demonstrate, in decisive fashion, the principle of *entelechy*; for it is only with the second plane that the potential of the

first may be said to be actualized. In the cataclysmic spectacle that is 9/11 the apocalyptic nature of all such actualization is revealed.

CATASTROPHE AS INTERRUPTION: THE ECSTASY OF THE SIGN

We live out our lives as a sequence or syntax of ordinary events. What 9/11 appeared to reveal is the terrifying aspect of the event as incision, as rupture, as *asyndeton*.[15] (These are above all the attributes of the first plane, with which the dual events of 9/11 are often identified; for the first plane is to the events of 9/11 as 9/11, understood as unitary event, is to everything else. The second plane did not have this incisive force; on the contrary, it functioned to suture what the first plane had severed.) An idyllic sky torn by the trajectory of an errant plane; a tower cleaved in two; a past abruptly severed from a present; an *us* from a *them*.[16] Through the force of this rupture, the very notions of temporality and territory appear to have been fractured (but therefore, we will see, necessarily reconfigured and reconstituted), surpassed, and thereby rendered obsolete. For many in America, and indeed around the world, the attack upon the World Trade Center

seemed to be the end of our world as we knew it. (And yet 9/11 was thus, one can see, an event that precipitated a certain *we*, for a time, into existence, a coalition, all too ephemeral, as it proved, of individual or communal or national subjectivities.[17])

This was the cataclysm many had long been waiting for: an irruption of violence so sudden, and so spectacular, that it seemed to signal the passage from one world—our world, the world of meaning, beset by ambiguities and contradictions—to another: a realm beyond meaning, or marked by a meaning so transcendent as to have no discernable content. (And yet content soon returned with a vengeance: the end of one world is necessarily the beginning of another.) The event seemed thus to mark a *rupture* with history itself (or was it merely an *interruption*, an *interlude*, an *interpolation*, a *parenthesis*, like this one, albeit of cataclysmic proportions?).

Only moments after the attack, one began to hear the now familiar refrain: *things will never be the same after 9/11*.[18] (Of course the event, even as it was happening, or by virtue of it happening, was already being drawn into history, tied to other events, other catastrophes, just as it, too, would lead to new events, new catastrophes—in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in England, in Spain. The logic of integration and interactivity referred to by Virilio is all too evident here, as we will see. Still, in the first

moment the magnitude of this disaster seemed almost liberatory, rendering ordinary concerns and personal anxieties insignificant. In that moment, things seemed to be *clear*.) As in the case of other classic disasters before it (Pearl Harbor, JFK, Hiroshima, etc.), the events of September 11 appeared to put an end (for a time at least) to the interminable and trivial business of speculation and analysis.[19] This is the insistent message of a speech President Bush delivers at the World Congress Center on 8 November 2001 ("Address to the Nation from Atlanta on Homeland Security [November 8, 2001]"). We are, Bush declares, now "learning to live in a world that seems very different than it was on September the 10th"; we are, he continues a moment later, "a different country than we were on September the 10th, sadder and less innocent."[20] Seven years after the attack, an address delivered by Bush during the commemorative ceremony held at the site of the former WTC began thus: "Seven years ago, at this hour, a doomed airliner plunged from the sky, split the rock and steel of this building. And changed our world forever" ("Nation Remembers 9/11, Victims"). Such formulations suggest to what extent the motif of the *world changed utterly*[21] depends on the trope of incision, again, but transferred to the temporal domain.

Was 9/11 truly the wake-up call that roused the

American leviathan from its deep and delusory sleep of innocence? It seems improbable that a single event, even on the scale of 9/11, could be the catalyst transforming, overnight, that essential American birthright, optimism, into a darker and deeper wisdom. That the events of September 11 could appear to effect such a transformation suggests, rather, that America's famous optimism has always been the other side of the coin of its equally persistent pessimism: that both its optimism and its pessimism are part and parcel of the same essentially *teleological* mindset. "No culture in the world," writes Jonathan Raban, in an essay in the *Guardian* entitled "Pastor Bush," "has elevated 'faith,' in and of itself … to the status it enjoys in the United States: faith in God, or the future, or the seemingly impossible, which is the core of the American Dream." But God, and the Future (and the Seemingly Impossible), I would suggest, are really the same thing when it comes to Americans, who may be said to *believe in* the former the same way they *believe in* the latter: as something that actually exists. America, after all, has always seen itself as a parthenogenetic nation, uncorrupted by history; born not of the traumas of the past but the possibilities of the future.[22] Futurism is America's true homegrown religion, and in this it is distinct, to some extent, from other nations, whose sense

of self-identity is almost always founded on the ritual resurrection of the past and the collective commemoration of historical trauma.[23]

But let me be more precise: Americans do not merely believe in the future as something that *exists*, as in some abstract or inchoate state; they believe in the future as something that *exists now*. The American Dream is a fantasy of and in the *future perfect*, where setting out to do something is the same as having already done it.[24] Temporality, governed by such a conviction, is both *teleological* (that is, we do not simply move forward in time, time carries us to a specific destination) and *tautological* (because we have, in effect, *already* arrived there). While "faith in the future" may seem to be just another way of describing a persistent optimism that, Americans like to believe, is one of their most endearing traits, it is more precisely an *apocalyptic* point of view: time understood both as a means to an *end*, and as a *revealing of that end* (*apokaluptō*: *to disclose* or *unveil*). America has always been an eschatological nation, wedded to destinies, manifest and esoteric. But the rise of evangelical faith in recent years, as well as evangelical politics (a politics based essentially in fear), suggests a cruder semioticization of history: the tendency to read events as *signs* pointing to an unalterable future.[25] (Temporality, understood in these *apocalyptic* terms, is effectively a *genre* or a *form*; that, more precisely, of *tragedy*: a discursive structure designed to reveal the ineluctability of its end, one in which the protagonist is complicit.)

The truth is, we are tired. We have been in that business—the business of reading signs—for a long time now. This is the business of *hermeneutics*. But what is it we are looking for, when we read? A reason to stop reading: the end of meaning; that is, both the cessation of a long search, and the fulfilment of its true purpose. It has been the fate of the West for most of its long history to be consumed in the act of waiting.[26] Like the jaded citizens of Constantine Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians," we always suspected the barbarians were at the gate. It had served our purposes to know they were out there. Indeed, we had looked forward to their coming, not just with a sense of dread, but with something approaching relief. (Blanchot: "The disaster takes care of everything" [3].) The order of our lives, like those of Cavafy's generic polis, had been founded entirely on teleological and, indeed, eschatological principles.

> What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
>
> The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the
senate?
Why do the senators sit there without
legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do
the legislating ...

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying
so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the
barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from
the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us
without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.
(17–18; trans. Keeley)

But the catastrophe that arrived was not the one we had been waiting for. It may be that the true catastrophe of 9/11, as in the polis of Cavafy, is that there was no catastrophe. What if there is nothing to wait for?

Consider the testimony of one of these citizens of the polis, ecstatic at the prospect of the barbarians, no longer at the gate, but already inside the city. The relief that the wait is over is palpable. Oriana Fallaci's apoplectic diatribe, *The Rage and the Pride*, written in the weeks following the attack on the WTC, rests on the premise that the categorical and hermeneutical imperatives are irreconcilable, and indeed that the first always supplants the second. A bad piece of writing: bad ideas, badly written. But Fallaci makes a convenient virtue of this badness, posing as a prophet in the desert, too righteously angry to measure her words or weigh her ideas. Now is not the time for critical dispassion but for arms: "Like a soldier who jumps out of the trench and launches himself against the enemy," Fallaci recalls in the preface, "I jumped on my typewriter [an image that gives one pause] and started doing the only thing I could do: write" (20). In Fallaci's own description of the genesis of *The Rage and the Pride*, writing is a form of action, more physical than intellectual; as if writing and thinking, or writing and reading, were mutually exclusive acts. If the

text remains, necessarily, a semiotic enterprise, it is on the order of an exclamation or interjection: a spit in the face (57), or an "unrestrainable cry" (21), or a "scream of rage and pride" (22).

Despite this apparent rejection of the interpretive gesture, *The Rage and the Pride* remains, in the end, a very traditional *reading* of catastrophe: one founded on the inherently contradictory proposition that the time for reading is over. Catastrophe is represented in this text as a sudden rupture with the past. Fallaci portrays her own decision to write, similarly, as a rupture with a personal *status quo* of silence (a moral and therefore eloquent *status quo*): "there are moments in Life when keeping silent becomes a fault, and speaking an obligation. A civic duty, a moral challenge, a categorical imperative from which we cannot escape. Thus, eighteen days after the New York apocalypse, I broke my silence.... And now I interrupt (I do not break, I interrupt) my exile with this small-book" (17–18). This interruption is parallel to that effected by the attack itself; but that this attack is itself a mere interruption of the *status quo* (like her response to it) is something, naturally, that Fallaci does not acknowledge. Instead, the destruction of the WTC and Fallaci's response are presented as parallel, and unparalleled, catastrophes. The book "was born all of a sudden. It burst like a bomb. Unexpectedly like

the catastrophe that on September 11 disintegrated thousands of creatures and destroyed two of the most beautiful buildings of our time: the Towers of the World Trade Center. The eve of the apocalypse I was concentrating on something quite different" (18). Fallaci would have been finishing a novel, she tells us, when this new task was abruptly imposed upon her. Writing a novel: the very image of linear continuity: a form of syntax, leisurely extended from one day to the next. The writing of *The Rage and the Pride* constitutes a violent suspension of this linear and leisurely temporality of the everyday.

Fallaci begins her account of September 11 in the traditional manner: recounting where she was when she learned that it happened. This is already a venerable gesture, long ago determined, we have seen, by the narrative protocols of catastrophe. This is how our parents speak of the assassination of John F. Kennedy; or how their parents speak of the attack on Pearl Harbor. But where we are when it (whatever *it* is) happens is in the midst of life. The event, in its catastrophic mode, is that which takes place while you are doing something else:

> I was at home, my house is in the center of Manhattan, and around 9 in the morning I had the sensation of a danger that maybe did not touch me directly but that for sure

concerned me. The sensation you get in combat, when with every pore of your skin you sense the bullet or the rocket arriving.... I rejected it. I said to myself that I was not in Vietnam, for Christsake.... I was in New York, on a marvellous morning of September. The 11th of September 2001. But the sensation went on possessing me inexplicably ... so I turned on the TV. Who knows why, the audio did not work. The screen, on the contrary, did. And on each channel ... you could see one of the World Trade Center Towers that from the eightieth floors on was burning like a gigantic match.... Almost paralyzed I continued to watch and while I was watching ... an airplane appeared on the screen. A big, white, commercial airplane. It was flying very low ... directing itself towards the second tower like a bomber that aims at the target.... Thus, I understood. I also understood because, right in the same moment, the audio came back on and relayed a chorus of choked screams ... "God! Oh, God! God! God! God! Oh, my Go-o-o-o-o-o-d!" Then the airplane slipped into the second tower as a knife slips into a stick of butter.

It was 9:03, now. (58–59)

This testimony relies crucially on both specular and auditory features. Fallaci consistently refers to the attack on the WTC as an *apocalypse* or, sometimes, *this Apocalypse*; a familiar, if facile, strategy for overloading the event with eschatological force. ("You also ask me to provide my testimony," Fallaci addresses her reader, "to tell you how I lived this Apocalypse" [58]—as if one could *live* an apocalypse, and *live* to *tell* it.) But who would have thought the apocalypse would be broadcast live on television? 9/11 was not simply an event that happened, after all, but one that Fallaci, like most of us, *watched happening* on television (watching television: what one does on an ordinary day; that which one does when one is doing *nothing*). (I return to the specular nature of the event later in this chapter, in the context of a discussion of the sublimity of catastrophe.) Suffice it to say for now that on September 11 Marshall McLuhan was vindicated with a force he could not have imagined: *the medium* is indeed *the message*. The terrorists counted on the truth of that assertion. We are blind to the true nature of catastrophe if we view it only in ethical terms. Catastrophe is first and foremost a *revelatory* gesture: it is a *rendering visible* of that which lies beyond our field of vision. Catastrophe, in other words, is always viewed through a form of *tele-vision* (vision *from afar*).

None of this is acknowledged in Fallaci's account, which thus has a strangely archaic ring to it. Fallaci turns on the television just as one might open the window to verify whether or not it is raining, to gain unmediated access to reality. And indeed, for most of us today truth is something we watch on television.

The revelatory aspect of the catastrophe is evident through the premonitory signal of the oracular (*I had the sensation of a danger* ...); that is, the event is *telegraphed* even before it is *televised*. But the true index that this is a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions is the inexplicable failure of the television audio. Catastrophe, at the moment of its arrival, is mute: a sign, surely, of its transcendental status; that it means too much or too little. The chatter of everyday life is suddenly checked; the semiotic retreats into the silence of the sublime. And so the event is apprehended, instead, *miraculously*, in a moment of pure specularity.

As is typical in 9/11 narratives, Fallaci's is marked, at its very center, by a break: a disjuncture or parenthesis or caesura or *intermezzo* or *luftpause* or *asyndeton*, formed by the interval between the advent of the first and second plane. But it may be the case that this is the essential structure of all catastrophe: to be always two events or two versions of the same event: the first one effecting

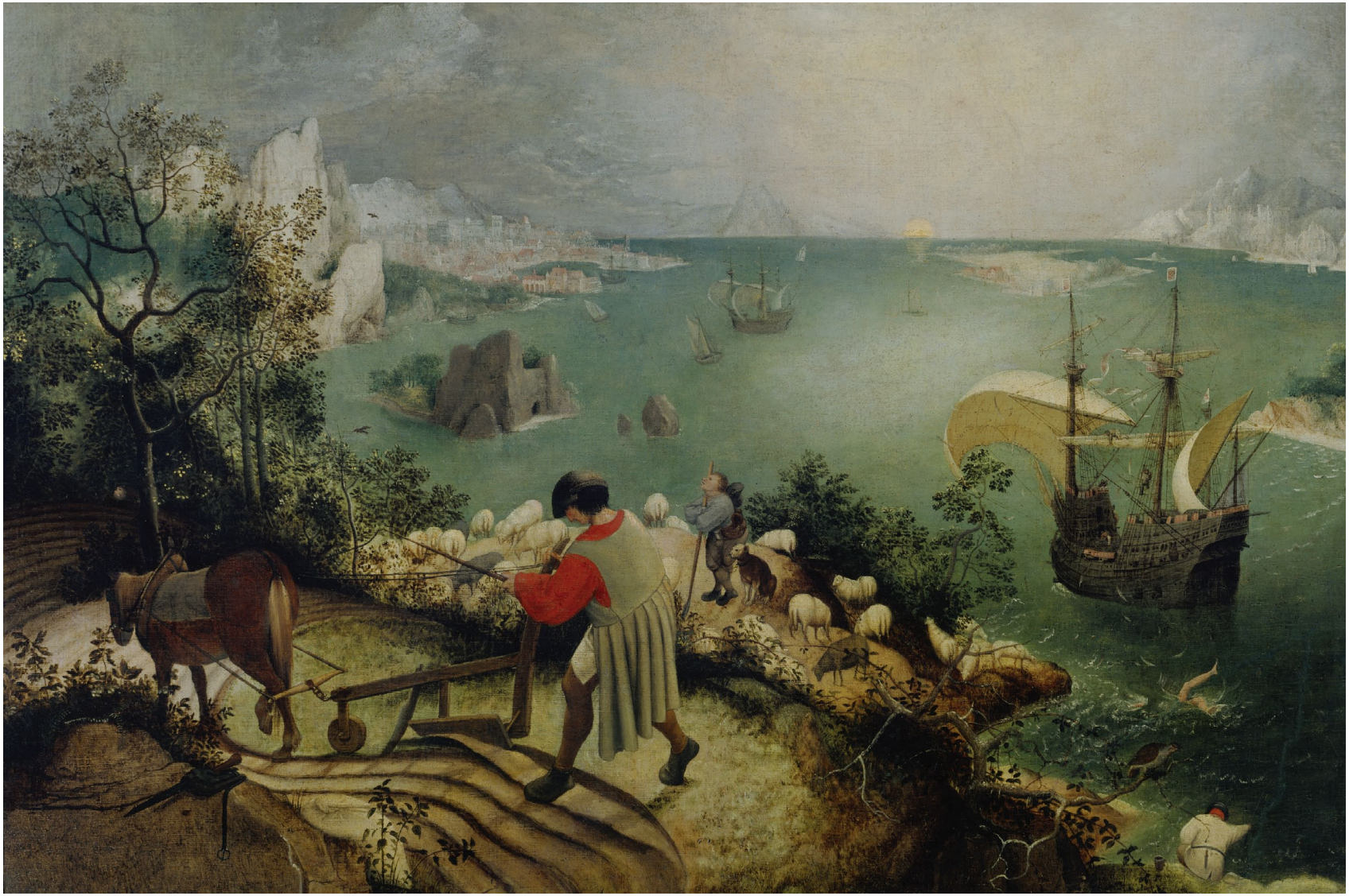
the suspension of syntax; the second its restoration. In this sense 9/11 has the form of the exemplary catastrophe. The interval between the first plane and the second marks the space of an absolute epistemological transformation that is proper to all catastrophe, which moves from an encounter with pure accidentality to the return of the telic. For the witness to catastrophe, the first moment marks the evacuation or erasure of the sign in the static contemplation of the transcendent (a moment identified, historically, with the sublime); the second marks the return of the sign and the triumph of causality (a moment equated, conventionally, with tragedy). In the first moment there is too little meaning, or too much; in the second, there are too many meanings. Watching the effects of the impact of the first plane, Fallaci is "paralyzed"; fixed before a mute screen, beset by questions without answers. The second plane, "directing itself towards the second tower like a bomber that aims at the target," arrives as the very embodiment of purposiveness; this is a plane with a plan. With that plane and that plan ordinary meaning comes flooding back: "Thus, I understood." And it is at that moment of understanding that, as if on cue, the television audio returns. (In Fallaci, one can see, this is all a little too staged, a little too cinematic. One might have thought such editorial

interventions superfluous, given that the terrorists themselves—the "authors" of 9/11—had already staged the event, as it were, to perfection.)

And so we are back in the familiar realm of discourse and debate. Fallaci's scream of rage and pride becomes, in the end, just another book (and best forgotten at that). Language resumes its ordinary chatter; life continues, much as it had before. The citizens of Cavafy's every-polis were, it appears, mistaken. Catastrophe does not represent an end to things, but merely an interruption; like the fall of Icarus in Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* as read by W. H. Auden in "Musée des Beaux Arts":

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters; how well, they understood
> Its human position; how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a
> window or just walking dully along;
> How, when the aged are reverently,
> passionately waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be
> Children who did not specially want it to
> happen, skating
> On a pond at the edge of the wood:
> They never forgot
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run
> its course
> Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
> Where the dogs go on with their doggy life
> and the torturer's horse
> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
>
> In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how
> everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the
> ploughman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
> But for him it was not an important failure;
> the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing
> into the green
> Water; and the expensive delicate ship that
> must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the
> sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Consider the catastrophe, for a moment, in its traditional aspect, as the exemplary *event*: namely, that which is absolutely heterodox, and absolutely heterogeneous; that which refuses all integration (semiotically, through the mechanism of coherence; temporally, through the principle of causality).



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*,
ca. 1528-1569. Oil on canvas, mounted on wood.

Thomas Hoepker, *Young People on the Brooklyn Waterfront on September 11*, 2001. (See 108–109n28.)

The ordinary event, the unmarked event, is that which makes perfect sense and perfect syntax. The tragic plot, as defined by Aristotle in chapter 7 of the *Poetics*, is founded upon such perfect syntax: an action "complete in itself" (1450b23–24; trans. Bywater), that is to say, comprised of a beginning, a middle, and an end connected by the principle of causality (or the appearance thereof).[27] By the terms of that venerable definition, the catastrophic event is neither a beginning, nor a middle, nor an end. But in Auden's poem the catastrophe is both that which resists incorporation into the larger totality of events (between this event and other events, no relation whatsoever inheres: no principle of causality, or coherence, or sympathy joining one to the other), and that which, even as it happens, dissolves instantaneously into that totality, which disappears, like Icarus, in the great sea of events, with barely a splash. (And hence the title of Bruegel's painting, which is, after all, not a painting of the fall of Icarus but a *landscape with the fall of Icarus*; Icarus' fall, that is to say, his *katastrophē*, is neither inside nor outside this landscape: it is *with* it.) *Everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster*: testimony both to its absolute transcendence (the catastrophe is sacrosanct, untouchable), and to its utter insignificance. *Things will never be the same*? Things are always the same.[28]

CATASTROPHE AS VIRUS: THE CONTAGION OF THE SIGN

American Airlines Flight 11 strikes the World Trade Center's North Tower at 8:46 a.m.; United Airlines Flight 175 strikes the South Tower at 9:03 a.m. Two punctuation marks, two marks punctuating time and space. Between them, the opening, and then the closing of a parenthesis: an ecstatic interregnum or *intermezzo*.

The first plane arrived, one will recall, in the manner of an accident; which is to say, in the mode, essentially revelatory, of *theophany*: a sign, but of that which we cannot know; a sign which is absolutely unreadable; a super-sign; a sign which is no longer, therefore, a sign. In this initial moment 9/11 seemed to constitute the leap we were long waiting for, from *logos* to *praxis*, from *verba* to *res*; as if we were witness to the death, or the transfiguration, of the sign. The second plane arrived in the manner of a ramification or contagion of meanings, a sudden outbreak, as

of a virus. We greeted the first plane with shock; the second, with recognition: another revelation, but this time of something we already knew. The first plane carried with it too much meaning (this was, we understood, a transcendental object), or too little (as a transcendental object, it was necessarily unreadable). With the second plane, the event became both more complicated and more transparent: suddenly it *meant* something, or rather too many things (and none of them particularly transcendent). Catastrophe, which appeared to arrive in accidental fashion, from without, like a sudden tear in the space-time continuum, was now understood to be merely the visible wake of an invisible sequence of events, a causality that began long ago and in which we were perhaps even complicit. If this was an accident, it was an accident *waiting to happen*.

These two events are generally conflated in accounts of 9/11—a failure to read which fatally limits our responses, which are inevitably self-contradictory, identifying the whole catastrophe, unwittingly, now with the first plane, now with the second. (This despite the obvious fact that, as I have already suggested, the attack itself was staged as its own reading, the second plane a response to and a reading of the first.) To return to a formula we have already employed: as the first

plane to the second, so the event itself (considered indivisible or unitary) to all other events. Within this protocol of reading, our response to 9/11 appears itself to follow a certain inevitable trajectory, one that seems to figure the very advent of knowledge itself, as we move from (initial) ecstasy and horror (wordless, beyond words) to (in the next moment) discourse and determinism (causal, juridical, ethical, etc.). These "stages" of catastrophic knowledge are perhaps best viewed as the figuration, within the cognitive or psychological domain, of a contradiction inherent in all catastrophe. Indeed, that there are distinct "moments" to catastrophe, or to our apprehension thereof, is precisely what 9/11 seems designed to demonstrate.

Taking now the second plane as our point of reference, catastrophe becomes more clearly a profound disruption, or, more precisely, *eruption*: a contagion that emanates from *within*, and which proliferates like a virus. As accident, the catastrophe functioned to sever, and therefore render static, once and for all, the ceaseless forward movement of temporality and temporizing; as contagion, the catastrophe sets in motion an ever-widening, ever-ramifying matrix of meanings with no beginning and no end. In its viral character catastrophe functions, then, in the manner of Virilio's *integral accidents*, that is, "accidents that integrate other

accidents" (100); or according to the logic of the *rhizome* as described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: "Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (1605; trans. Massumi). The rhizome is "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory[.]" In rhizomatic fashion, the catastrophe does not *signify*, it neither refers us back to any *arkhē*, nor refers us forward to any *telos*, points of origin or destination that lie outside the realm of signification. Like the rhizome, the viral catastrophe "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills."[29]

Exteriority (that which lies at the beginning or the end of a syntagm is external to it) is the classic mark of the accidental; in its viral mode catastrophe is an *internal* and even *systemic* disturbance (in Deleuzian/Guattarian terms, a disturbance *in the middle* or *of the milieu*). Implicit in Cavafy's disquisition on disaster is another lurking suspicion: that if the barbarians are no longer outside the gates, it is because they are already inside the city. It is *we* who are the barbarians. That is the terrible

truth that sends the citizens scurrying home. Catastrophe is not something that descends from afar, like an enemy army. Catastrophe is internal to the system; it inhabits the polis, just another citizen.

And so the catastrophe, which appeared to signal our essential passivity, to liberate us from the rituals and responsibilities of interpretation and analysis, forces them upon us with greater urgency. Catastrophe, which at first seemed to surpass the semiotic, is itself re-semiotized: reclaimed as something meaningful (and therefore banal; just another event, only larger in magnitude, with a higher body count). The events of 9/11, which seemed to transcend the very limits of the semiotic, are reinvested with a plurality of meanings, become an object of commentary, analysis, and accountability. Causes can be identified, conspiracies exposed, and blame assigned.

Once one begins to reinscribe an event in a chain of determinant causes, however, it is difficult to know where to arrest the process. This is an uncertainty constitutive of hermeneutics, as it is of paranoia, as it is, we will see, of tragedy.[30] The longer the chain, and the larger the context, the more nebulous the terrorists' target appears, and the more diffuse their motive(s).[31]

For critics such as Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard, for example, 9/11 was not a simple attack on the

West by some force distinct from and opposed to it. For them the assault upon the WTC does not indicate an *agon* between antithetical forces, even less a grandiose clash of civilizations: but, rather, an attack upon a monolithic, hegemonic order (globalization, world capitalism, the West, call it what you will), one that emanates, significantly, from that same order.[32] 9/11 can therefore be diagnosed, as Baudrillard does in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (*L'esprit du terrorisme*), as "terror against terror" ("terreur contre terreur") (16).[33] Such an attack is born from within the very system it aims to destroy (it is an orgy of self-loathing). Whether that system is good or bad is irrelevant: terrorism is, within this analysis, *structurally* inevitable. Virilio, similarly, writes in *Crepuscular Dawn*: "September 11 opened Pandora's Box. In this new situation, New York is what Sarajevo was. Sarajevo triggered the First World War. New York is the attack in the first war of globalization. An internecine war, a civil war" (178–79). In 9/11 we are witness, for the first time, to a war without a front; for war is now integral and systemic.

In this sense 9/11 is a suicide of systemic order; a disorder emanating from within the system. Indeed, in *L'esprit du terrorisme* Baudrillard explicitly uses the term *suicide* to describe the collapse of the WTC on September 11: "When the two towers collapsed, one had the impression that they were

responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides" ("Quand les deux tours se sont effondrées, on avait l'impression qu'elles répondaient au suicide des avions-suicides par leur proper suicide") (13). This would make catastrophe less a *viral attack* than an *allergic reaction*. Some kind of external irritant is necessary of course; but in the formation of allergenesis even the most innocent of objects may prove catastrophic. The allergen itself cannot properly be regarded as the "cause" of an allergy; it is, in allergy, the body which turns against itself.

In H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, one will recall, the Martian invasion is not undone in the end by the arsenal of fearsome weapons directed against it, all of which prove ineffectual, but "slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the red weed was being slain; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth" (444). But what 9/11 proves, if anything, is that it is not a Martian invasion we need fear. There are no Martians, in this scenario; or rather, it is we who are the Martians.[34] And what we need fear is *the humblest things that God, in his wisdom*—or man, in his—*has put upon this earth*. It is, we now suspect, the most familiar objects in our midst (the common cold; an ordinary

passenger airplane), or the next door neighbor, perhaps, who will be our undoing.[35]

That first plane, in retrospect, after the advent of the second, possessed a primordial innocence, an archaic purity that is difficult, in present circumstances, to retrieve. It appears, now, the very emblem of pure potentiality and perfect polysemy. American Airlines Flight 11 could have been going anywhere, and could have been carrying anything, freighted, therefore, with a cargo (that of meaning itself) both infinitely light and heavy.[36] This was just another airplane in the sky, an object comforting in its familiarity and its insignificance, one that, because it meant absolutely nothing, could have meant absolutely anything.

All that, now, seems rather naive (I speak from within this historicizing narrative). Pure polysemy seems a luxury we can no longer afford; not when the end of the world (as we know it) could come at any time, and from any direction. Objects—all objects—are now tainted by suspicion, which proliferates, just as catastrophe itself appears to have proliferated, in the manner of a virus.[37] Indeed, we have become suspicious of objectivity itself; it is the very fact of the object itself that is now deemed a threat: for the object, to return to the Aristotelian paradigm with which we began, is by definition an accident waiting to happen, an apocalyptic

entity. Catastrophe has infiltrated the system in the manner of a pandemic, and left nothing uninfected.

Not long after the events of September 11, one began to see the following injunction, or variations thereof, posted prominently in public places: "Please report all suspicious packages." A number followed, whereby the proper authorities could be alerted. Beginning in March of 2003, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) in New York City launched a campaign (courtesy of its advertising agency, Korey Kay & Partners) with the now ubiquitous tagline, "If you see something, say something." That campaign (quickly adopted by numerous municipalities around the country) was later supplemented with a series of ads entitled "The Eyes of New York," which, according to the MTA online newsletter (*The MTA Newsroom*), "features close-up photographs of a dozen sets of eyes with the headline 'There are 16 million eyes in the city. We're counting on all of them.' The ads remind customers of the need to stay aware of their surrounds [*sic*] and to report anything suspicious" ("MTA Rolls Out 'The Eyes of New York' Ad Campaign").

These various campaigns constitute the *signs* (literal and figurative) of a culture that has lived through one disaster and is looking for the next; a culture both terrified and seduced by the notion

of the catastrophe just around the corner, and emanating from *within*. Catastrophe, defined in these terms, as *that which is about to happen*, and *about to happen anywhere*, appears to mobilize a certain *hermeneutics of suspicion*: our very survival, that is, depends on our being alert to the meaning of things, alert, that is, to things in their capacity as *signs* (the imperative to *report* thus plays on its dual functions, that of narrative and surveillance: one *reports about* something, or *reports* someone *to* the authorities). Meaning post-9/11, then, has itself become something truly apocalyptic; for in the apocalypse the end of things is inseparable from the unveiling of the truth of things, the revelation of their meaning. Compare these various campaigns with the famous "Uncle Sam Wants You" recruitment drive, employed so effectively in both World War I and World War II.[38] It used to be that Americans were called upon to join the fight against an enemy abroad; now they are asked to identify the signs of his presence within. Hermeneutics has become, it would appear, the chief civic duty of the American citizenry. And Americans appear to have responded to the call. Almost seven years after the attack on the WTC, the following announcement could be seen at the Great Neck train station for the Long Island Railroad, applauding the New Yorker for his or her unflagging semiotic vigilance:

> Last year, 1,944 New Yorkers Saw Something and Said Something.[39] Thank you for keeping your eyes and ears open.
> And not keeping your suspicions to yourself.
>
> If you see something, say something. Tell a cop or an MTA employee. Or call 1-888-NYC-SAFE.
>
> —Metropolitan Transportation Authority

And so Americans have become, it would seem, a nation of semioticians. Our ability to read the signs, after all, may stave off the next disaster.

Or is it not rather the case that our very efforts to read the signs of the end of the world are a mechanism for hastening its arrival? Is suspicion a vaccine against disaster, or the very mechanism of its contagion? In our interpretive exertions are we perhaps less interested in isolating the virus of catastrophe (unveiling it, exposing it, neutralizing it) than in confirming what we already know[40]: that the virus of catastrophe is everywhere, and that every object is therefore potentially infected?[41]

Consider more closely the phrase *suspicious package*, which has become ubiquitous, as in the injunction "Please report all *suspicious packages*" which now appears in every airport, every post office, on billboards, subways, and television

commercials. Events like the following, reported in the *New York Times* on 26 December 2001, have become an ordinary feature of everyday life:

> A terminal at Los Angeles International Airport was evacuated for almost three hours this morning after officials noticed suspicious packages that turned out to be wrapped Christmas presents. "Someone discovered gifts wrapped in a trash can, and given today's environment, they had to investigate," said a spokesman for the airport, Tom Winfrey. ("Terminal Is Evacuated for Suspicious Packages")

What does this directive, "Please report all *suspicious packages*," truly ask us to do? Tautological and sweepingly comprehensive, it does not encourage us, as it might seem, to distinguish suspicious packages from innocent ones, but rather to dispense with the formality of making distinctions at all. It appears that we are being asked to be more vigilant as readers; in fact, what we are being asked to do is read everything the same way (which is the same as not reading at all); thus the effect of this exhortation is to dull, not sharpen, our interpretive faculties.[42] Every package, now, is a potential bomb waiting to explode. [43] Any object in motion

is a potential missile seeking out its target. Every stranger is a potential serial killer; every neighbour a potential terrorist. Everything has become a sign; but the same sign: the sign of the end (which means that every sign refers to every other sign). The result is both a proliferation and a flattening of meaning (everything means, but everything means the same thing), meaning that precedes and precludes any true hermeneutics.[44]

Suspicion, I have suggested, would appear to be the very precondition of hermeneutics; but here it has begun to mean something else: something closer to fear, or paranoia. Moreover, isn't it *we* who ought to be suspicious, and not our packages? Of course, we know what is really meant here: a suspicious package is one that elicits suspicion. But the phrase nonetheless unsettles the distinction between subject and object, and helps to conjure up hallucinatory images of packages that have come alive. Perhaps it is *they* who are suspicious of *us*. The phrase is vague enough, in any case, to confirm our fears that dark, apocalyptic forces are at work around us.[45] And the role we have to play, meanwhile, in the struggle against these forces has nothing to do with semiotics. Quite the contrary; consider what this injunction asks us, precisely, to do: to *not* be suspicious; to identify, in no uncertain terms, objects that we have already determined

(but how?) to be suspicious. The "authorities" whose number is provided will take care of the rest.

What does it mean to live in the realm of signs? Implicit here is the proposition that the meaning of things is something hidden inside them, and must be forced out into the open. Signs, to put it crudely, are things which appear to be one thing and are really something else. That is why we need to read them carefully. But all signs, in this sense, are and always have been *suspicious packages*, signifiers whose signifieds can only be revealed through the practice of interpretation.

CATASTROPHE AS ANTIDOTE: THE RETURN OF THE SIGN

In its accidental mode, I have suggested, the catastrophe is the singular: that which intervenes, but cannot be integrated. The advent of the first plane suggests the very paradigm of catastrophe as *pure event*: an incision made upon an absolutely seamless and homogeneous substance; the inscription, without prologue or preparation, of a mark (the first mark and the last mark) upon a perfectly blank page. *Inscription* is thus, paradoxically enough, the same thing as *erasure*. 9/11, imagined as *pure event*, is thus a washing clean of the slate of history, crowded and corrupted with the marks of the past.[46]

As the first to the second plane, so both planes, apprehended as one, in relation to everything else. 9/11 is regularly cited, much like the Holocaust, as a transcendent or singular event: an event that stands on its own, and cannot be compared with other (merely contingent) events. The very comparison

between 9/11 and the Holocaust by virtue of their shared singularity is, one can see, an act that thereby robs each of them of that very quality.[47] There is something defensive and self-serving, of course, in this insistence on the singularity of catastrophe, the notion of the transcendent and sacrosanct event that erases, or renders obsolete, what came before.

In its viral aspect, as a form of contagion, the catastrophe is that which renders such singularity impossible, for it is the very triumph of repetition itself. Let us not forget what, by virtue of being self-evident, is easy to forget: that the second plane is first and foremost the repetition of the first; which is to say, its rewriting, its replacement, its revision, its uncanny return.[48] We may well have thought, with the arrival of the second plane, what is in fact the case: that catastrophe had become contagious.[49]

In this *mise-en-scène* of catastrophe as repetition, inscription is revealed to be a form, not of *erasure*, but of rewriting; or rather, all erasure is revealed to be a form of rewriting; just as all forgetting is a form of remembering. 9/11 is the proof, if one were needed, that the advent of the new is but the return of the old. America, we have seen, has long cast itself, and been cast by others, as a nation founded upon the principle of *entelechy*: the actualization, in the future, of a truth already present *in potentia*.

I have suggested that this *future perfectionism* (America's fabled *can-do* optimism) is, more properly speaking, an *apocalyptic* principle: a total dedication to an *end* not yet entirely in sight. But consider once again the citizens of Cavafy's mythic polis in "Waiting for the Barbarians": perhaps it is not the case that they are consumed in the act of waiting for an indeterminate future; perhaps it is rather that they are paralyzed by a longing for a past determined long ago. Eschatology, in other words, is simply an inverted form of nostalgia.

Catastrophe is not, then, that which arrives; it is that which returns. What we are waiting for is not the coming of the end; but its second (or third, or fourth) coming. The messianic and redemptive eschatology of Christianity is but the most obvious performance of this principle of repetition, embodied (literally) in the arch-principle of *parousia* (in Liddell and Scott, significantly, both *presence* and *arrival*), the standard term in the New Testament for the second coming of Christ.[50] By the terms of this eschatological model, 9/11 can be viewed as a kind of Satanic *parousia*: a lesson in the second coming; or the third or the fourth (as, indeed, there was a third and a fourth plane; as there will be other planes, inevitably, someday). Blanchot calls disaster "A nonreligious repetition, neither mournful nor nostalgic, a return not desired" (and yet, I

would argue, desired all the same), and continues: "Wouldn't the disaster be, then, the repetition—the affirmation—of the singularity of the extreme? The disaster as the unverifiable, the improper" (5–6). Blanchot returns repeatedly in *The Writing of the Disaster* to this motif of repetition undermining singularity: "The disaster comes back; it would always be the disaster after the disaster" (6); and again: "Since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it" (28).[51]

We live in a world born of catastrophe, real or imagined. That makes our world a fallen world, a postlapsarian world cut off from an idyllic origin (call it Eden, or the Golden Age, or the Platonic *chora* [*khōra*]), when truth had not yet absconded, absented itself, or veiled itself in mystery, when signifiers had not yet diverged from signifieds, and the hard labor of interpretation was not yet a necessity enjoined upon us all (this would be the realm of what Derrida calls the *transcendental signified*—the retrieval of which is the perennial fantasy of all *logocentricism*—or *the metaphysics of presence*).[52] To return to that origin is what we both desire and fear. Hermeneutics is the long way forward (which is to say, back): a systematic effort at reading designed to attain a truth that would render reading obsolete. Catastrophe is the shortcut

to the end. (Blanchot, again: "The disaster takes care of everything" [3].) It takes a new disaster to erase the old one, a new rupture with the present to repair the rift with the past. The new catastrophe is the redemption of the old; just as the Passion of Christ would be the redemption of our sins. One catastrophe serves as antidote to another.[53]

Long before the Twin Towers fell, another tower, this one on the Plain of Shinar, was struck by disaster, its architects confounded and scattered by a plague of mutual incomprehension. Babel, as narrated in Genesis 11, is often understood as a parable of hubris punished. That may be the case; but what was it that allowed Babel to rise in the first place? The ability to speak with a single voice; to be, in semiotic terms, a community of one. Prior to the intervention at Babel, according to Genesis 11:1: "The whole earth was of one language, and of one speech." After the disaster at Babel, its builders found themselves in a situation we know all too well: mired in differences, condemned to be translators and interpreters: "Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (Genesis 11:9).

And what of the disaster that took place in New Babel, on September 11?[54] At first there was

the sense—both terrifying and exhilarating—that history itself had been erased; that the sins of Babel were now paid for in full. Through this expulsion into a world *after 9/11*, we had thereby returned to a world before history, to *ground zero*, as it were.[55] These grandiose and hyperbolic assertions are defensive gestures, it seems clear, against history: gestures of forgetting, not remembering. Thus 9/11 is not a rude awakening, but an occasion for amnesia. Forget Babel: before September 11 (2001) one will recall (but will one?) there was February 26 (1993), when a car bomb was detonated in the public parking garage of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. How many of us remember this event, or remember to remember it? But the traces of the past are there, and will not be expunged. The singularity of the event, and the simplicity it seemed to promise, are soon compromised by memories, aetiologies, ambiguities and explanations. The comparison with Babel is a convenient one, of course, turning 9/11 into a catastrophe of biblical proportions with redemptive consequences. But the comparison is also ironic; because 9/11 turns out to be, in effect, a replay of Babel: a return to the cacophony and confusion of everyday life. We thought the time for reading was over; but we remain readers, exiles in the desert of the semiotic.

In the American response to the events of 9/11,

which we may abbreviate as the policy of *rebuild and rebomb*, we can watch the principle of amnesia eerily reassert itself. Hence the efficiency of the mop-up at ground zero: the pride New York took in showing the world just how quickly it got back up on its feet again. It was clear that things would indeed continue to be business as usual. This is, in a way, a more chilling erasure of history than the destruction of the Twin Towers; so that, ironically, we can now watch New Yorkers finishing the business Osama bin Laden began.[56] And so now there is a new structure, 1 WTC (formerly known as The Freedom Tower) even taller than the first. There is a very American logic at work here and a very New York logic as well: for both are agoraphobic cultures, driven by the fear of empty space (hence the totemic force of the very words *ground zero*). More precisely: these are cultures in love with the idea of space, but as something to be occupied.[57] In *akrophilic* New York the American mythology of manifest destiny is turned into pure verticality. Knock it down; we'll build another one. This is precisely the logic bin Laden was counting on (just as he was counting on the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq).

Compare Berlin to New York; compare the ruins of Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church on Kurfürstendamm to the new structure going up at ground zero. In Berlin there is the containment

of disaster through its memorialization, its sanctification. Catastrophe becomes visible as shrine or ruin. This logic of the ruin helps to explain why the terrorists chose a *building* as their target. For architecture is a barometer of time: material evidence of a before and an after. What is a ruin but the corpse of a building? New York City, however, world capital of modernity, is a city that abhors the ruin; here, instead, it is the logic of amnesia that rules. If 9/11 is an event that erases history, with the rebuilding at ground zero history now returns (by way of new buildings and new names) to erase the event. Eleven years later, however, the phoenix is still rising from the ashes of the former WTC. The debate about the proper way to honor, architecturally speaking, the memory of 9/1l goes on; meanwhile, ironically enough, the ruins at ground zero are, for many New Yorkers, an embarrassing reminder of the past, and evidence of an inability to move forward.[58]

The singularity of the catastrophe is always compromised, always multiplied, by the traces of other catastrophes, catastrophes rewritten or erased—no, not erased, not completely, put *under erasure* (*sous rature*), rather. I refer here to Derrida's practice, borrowed from Heidegger's *The Question of Being* (70–71; trans. Kluback and Wilde), of allowing both a word and its deletion to remain

visible in the text; a strategic and rhetorical protest against a propositional language that affirms, necessarily, the principle of being as presence—a principle with which one cannot nevertheless dispense.[59] As soon as one asks, Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, the old question, "What is the sign?" that is to say, "when one submits the sign to the question of essence, to the '*to esti*,'" one calls forth the "inevitable response": "The formal essence of the signified is *presence*" (18; trans. Spivak). "One cannot get around that response," Derrida asserts (and has no choice but to *assert*), "except by challenging the very form of the question and beginning to think that the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: what is ... ?" (19).

The catastrophe is thus a haunting: the event haunted by the traces of other events which it rewrites, or writes over, but cannot fully erase. So on 9/11, where the second plane puts the first plane, in effect, under erasure; where the trace of the first plane remains visible in the second. In the *difference* between these planes this event has its true identity; and, as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, "difference cannot be thought without the trace" (57). That is a cogent summary of Derrida's entire rehabilitation of writing as the very principle of difference: this new writing, which

already inhabits the old, goes by the paradoxical names of *arche-writing*, or *arche-trace* (for writing, or the trace, is precisely that which has no *arche* [*arkhē*], no *origin*, but which always points to an origin outside itself). The concept of the *arche-trace*

> is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin … it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except … by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.[60] (61)

It is this *arche-writing* that appears to be rendered visible or made empirical in the *difference* between the two planes that constitutes, paradoxically, the essence of 9/11. For neither in the first plane nor the second is the full force of this catastrophe present; it is, rather, in the trace of the first in the second,

and that of the second in the first, towards which, in retrospect, it now appears to point; it is, in other words, to continue in this Derridean mode, not in the difference between the two planes ("constituted difference," difference understood as a static and stable feature) but in their *differance*: that is to say, in the "pure movement which produces" their "difference" (62). *Differance* (*différance*), which ought to be translated (simultaneously) as *difference*, *differing*, and *deferring*,[61] is, in short, another word for *writing* itself, or the *trace*: "*The (pure) trace* [a contradiction in terms, since the trace is always what it is by virtue both of what it is and what it is not] *is differance*"[62] (62).

Differance, significantly for our purposes, has both its temporal and spatial aspects. If meaning always appears simply *present*, in a passive sense, in the trace, then "[t]his passivity is also the relationship to a past, to an always-already there that no reactivation of the origin could fully master and awaken to presence.… This is what authorized us to call *trace* that which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of the present" (66). On the other hand, it may equally be said "that its passivity is also its relationship with the 'future'" (67).[63] But it is *differance* as the very gesture of "spacing (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc.) which constitutes the origin of

signification" (68), signification which is rooted, by Saussure's own assertion (and this despite all of his efforts to make language a conscious or psychological phenomenon), in the "fundamental unconsciousness of language," that is, in language as form, not substance. Spacing, which "speaks," Derrida hastens to add, "the articulation of space *and* time" (italics mine), "is always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious." *Differance* as *spacing* is always "the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject" (69); it is, in short, the very form of death itself. And yet, this becoming-absent/becoming-unconscious, as "the subject's relationship with its own death," is therefore the very "constitution of subjectivity." These claims take on an ominous cast in light of the events of 9/11. And indeed, the very form of this disaster, a differential form based on spacing (on the pause, the blank, the interval), seems the spectacular confirmation that all writing, as Derrida asserts, is indeed a matter of life and death. All writing is constituted by *interruption*, a catastrophic spacing which "marks *the dead time* … within the general form of all presence" (68). Writing is born of the *interruption* that is catastrophe itself. Derrida refers to this *interruption*, which we have called *asyndeton*, as *brisure*, which one would translate as *break*, *crack*, *fracture*, or even

diffraction. Spivak's rendering of this term, simply, as *hinge* unfortunately neutralizes the catastrophic aspects of the term. Spacing, Derrida writes, "cuts, drops, and causes to drop within the unconscious: the unconscious is nothing without this cadence and before this caesura.... This hinge [*brisure*] of language as writing, this discontinuity … marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence" (69). 9/11 is this catastrophic sign (the first plane the signifier of the second plane as signified, or vice versa) whose very signifying power hinges on its own interruption, its own fracture: between the first plane and the second plane, a terrible *caesura*: that which *cuts, drops, and causes to drop*.

The second plane: a second break; a second cut; proof that there will always be other planes, other fractures, other interruptions, more or less catastrophic.[64] As the ceaseless becoming-absent of the present, *differance* suggests a certain instability which already inhabits the mimetic system which is the very essence of a Platonism (call it the *metaphysics of presence*) that remains fully in force, and which Derrida examines more closely in "The Double Session" in *Dissemination* (173–285). This is a system designed, in essence, to arbitrate the ontological, to distinguish, that is, between

an original *on* or *being-present* (trans. Johnson) and the mere repetition or representation thereof: "That which is, the being-present … is distinguished from the appearance, the image, the phenomenon, etc., that is, from anything that, presenting it *as* being-present, doubles it, re-presents it, and can therefore replace and de-present it. There is thus the 1 and the 2, the simple and the double. The double comes *after* the simple; it multiplies it as a *follow-up*" (191). But there has always been, Derrida points out, "an internal division within mimesis" (191); the entire history of Platonism (which includes, Derrida points out, the various "anti-Platonisms" which "regularly feed into it") is determined by "the paradoxes of the supplementary double: the paradoxes of something that, added to the simple and the single, replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike, unlike because it is—in that it is—like, the same as and different from what it duplicates" (191). What is at stake in this arbitration is the very location of truth itself:

> Let us retain the schematic law that structures Plato's discourse: he is obliged sometimes to condemn *mimêsis* in itself as a process of duplication, whatever its model might be, and sometimes to disqualify *mimêsis* only in function of the model that is "imitated," the mimetic operation in itself remaining neutral, or even advisable. But in both cases, *mimêsis* is lined up alongside truth: either it hinders the unveiling [*alētheia*] of the thing itself by substituting a copy or double for what it is; or else it works in the service of truth through the double's resemblance (*homoiôsis* [*adaequatio*]). (187; brackets mine)

Let us not forget this notion of mimesis as the unveiling of truth (*alētheia*), which is always active, even in the imitation as mere double. An *apocalyptic* logic is already operative in the mimetic act as envisaged by Plato.

The dual events that constitute the event known as 9/11 appear to illustrate these ontological paradoxes and apocalyptic possibilities which are constitutive of all mimesis: the second plane is the same and yet different from the first plane, which it duplicates; and by virtue of being its double, the second plane is therefore its supplement; by virtue of being its supplement, it thereby "reveals" its truth. The second plane here is the *eternal return* of the first: the affirmation, with catastrophic consequences, of identity, not difference.[65] The title of Derrida's "The Double Session" "works" on many levels, referring simultaneously to (a) the two successive gatherings at which the text itself was

delivered; (b) two other texts, namely, an excerpt from Plato's *Philebus* and Mallarmé's *Mimique*, the juxtaposition of which forms the occasion for Derrida's reflections on mimesis, for it is a way of asking what Derrida wants to ask, namely, "what goes (on) or doesn't go (on) *between* [*entre*] literature and truth?" (183); (c) the various possible *pre-texts* for Mallarmé's text, to which it does or does not refer; but, above all (d) the doubling which is (paradoxically) the essence of mimesis itself, for better or worse. On 9/11, for much worse: this is a *double session* of the catastrophic order.

Two planes; two buildings. Compare the *twin towers* of the World Trade Center to the twin ghosts of the twin girls that figure in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. In both cases there is no possible distinction between an original and a copy, or between one object and another object. The doubling of the twin is a threat to the principle of identity, to the axiom that each thing is what it is, and not some other thing. What unnerves us in both pairs is the specter of *differance*, the prospect of infinite reference, each twin signifying the other, in a recurrent gesture of mimesis that has no origin or end. The effect is akin to vertigo. Such objects, which refuse to be distinguished from each other, and indeed refuse the very notion of distinction, are an abomination, and cannot long be tolerated:

they must fall.

There is never enough space between twins, just as there is never enough space, for Plato, between the *mnēmē* and the *mimēsis*, between the original and its double. Such spacing, one will recall, is both a spatial and a temporal principle: within the Platonic schematic, *the double comes* after *the simple*, which it redoubles: it is a ghost that comes to haunt the original (just as the original is haunted by the specter of its own doubleness). Kubrick's twins are a spectral pair: two girls, the very picture of a primordial past, who were brutally slaughtered long ago, and whose death is endlessly replayed in the halls of the hotel where they fell. New York is haunted now, too, by its own fallen twins, whose death is replayed over and over again,[66] an image, as it is in Kubrick's film, of innocence defiled.[67] And yet, as in the case of *The Shining*, that death now seems somehow inevitable, called forth by the threat of *differance*, each twin reflected endlessly in the other, a referential *mise en abyme*. It is that prospect of referential vertigo that must be put to an end. In an individual innocence is something we can believe in: it is the very mark of authenticity. Innocence in a pair of twins appears to be a diabolical fraud; it makes a mockery of our faith in the singularity of the human. Kubrick's twins, then, are not just a pair of murdered girls: they stand for

the fall of subjectivity itself as something simple and singular.

It is to state the obvious that the Twin Towers were a symbolic target; that they were a sign of something. And yet it should be evident by now that this particular piece of architecture was designed, precisely, to refuse the status of a simple sign. That there were two towers, not one, made the WTC difficult to read *monolithically*; and it was for this reason that they had to be destroyed—both of them. What these towers stood (and fell) for cannot be separated from how they stood (and fell) for it. To say (as it is often said) that the WTC stood for a system of global and unrestricted trade is simply to acknowledge their participation in a regime of *differance*, which could be construed, after all, as the principle of unlimited free trade in the semiotic domain. The lone skyscraper suggests phallic vulnerability: a single target, as at Babel, waiting to fall, indeed daring us to knock it down—a tower of blocks built by a megalomaniacal child. The twin towers of the World Trade Center suggested something more insidious and more difficult to target: an endlessly repeating vista of replication. These towers stood as the testament to an eternally self-sustaining regime of reproduction and consumption, based on the production and dissemination of copies; a neurotic regime, we

might say, founded on the *compulsion to repeat*, to borrow from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (40; trans. Strachey).[68] "Why," Baudrillard asks prophetically in *Simulations* (originally published in 1981), "are there two towers at New York's World Trade Center?"

> This architectural graphism is that of the monopoly.... The fact that there are two of them *signifies* the end of all competition, the end of all original reference. Paradoxically, if there were only one, the monopoly would not be incarnated.... For the sign to be pure, it has to duplicate itself: it is the duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning. This is what Andy Warhol demonstrates also: the multiple replicas of Marilyn's face are there to show at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation. (136; trans. Foss, Patton, and Beitchman)

But surely the construction of these towers, like their destruction, suggests that this breakdown of the referential process is itself a symptom of a persistent traumatic neurosis (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 28–30). Just as Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* (a set of ten screenprints produced in 1967) refers back to his silkscreen car crashes, such as *Green Car*

Crash (Green Burning Car) (part of a series entitled *Death and Disaster*, produced between 1962 and 1964), in which the same disaster is represented in a linear series of truncated images, so Baudrillard's ode to the Twin Towers in *Simulations* (135–37) presages his elegy for their destruction in *Requiem for the Twin Towers*.[69] Two towers call for two planes; they give birth to two events. In this twin catastrophe, it is no longer possible to think of the event as something singular; it is no longer possible to think of a first event or a last event, the event *remembered* and the event *repeated* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 39). Indeed, what 9/11 may have taught us is that there is no such thing as *the event*. Or to put this differently: the event can only be understood in the form of *catastrophe*.

CATASTROPHE AS SUBLIMITY: THE SPECTACLE OF THE SIGN

9/11 appears designed, then, as an assault upon the very notion of the *mark* or the trace as a pure and singular incision: that which would allow us to make a simple and unambiguous distinction between a *mnēmē* and a *mimēsis*, an original and its double, or a past and a future. The argument for singularity has, historically, been most often invoked in the service of the Shoah, as in Adorno's famous "dictum" (or rather in the way it has been received as such) that "It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz" ("Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbaric") (*Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I* [30]).[70] Consider, now, the irony in seeking to demonstrate the *singularity* of 9/11 by comparing it to Auschwitz; for the singular event is that which, by definition, cannot be compared with any other.

The comparison with Auschwitz is, in any case, rather specious. For the death camps were less

an event than an arrangement of many events; an entire culture in effect (a nightmarish one, like Homer's Hades or Dante's Inferno) and, significantly, a covert one, hidden from view. Hiroshima, on the other hand, is a better analogy: the very model of catastrophe as both singular and *spectacular* event. The explosion of the atom bomb is the preeminent image for modernity of catastrophe as *theophany*. Remember Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called "father of the atomic bomb," recalling the words of Vishnu from the *Bhagavad Gita* as he witnesses the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo on 16 July 1945: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" ("J. Robert Oppenheimer on the Trinity Test").[71] The atom bomb thus merely renders *visible* what catastrophe has always been in its *theophanic* mode: a *rendering visible* of that which is (ordinarily) invisible.[72]

Even here, however, the logic of the binary event asserts itself. As a strategy in the endgame of World War II, one atom bomb would not have sufficed. One bomb suggests a singular event; an irreproducible fluke; an obscene departure from normality; the advent of the extraordinary; the sudden manifesting of divine wrath. Two bombs, on the other hand, constitute a way of life: they imply a system, a strategy, a new kind of normality. With the advent of Nagasaki, the first bomb is but an augur

of the second; the second an augur of a third. The first bomb has the force of an accident: the second that of an institution. In the institutionalization of the atom bomb, theophany becomes a veritable *techne*: something repeatable at will.

When it comes to catastrophe, it would appear, *seeing is believing*. But *if a tree falls in the woods, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?* What if, at the moment of the attack on the World Trade Center, everyone in the world had looked away, and turned off their television sets? The event would have never happened, then—not as an act of terrorism, for terrorism depends on the presence of a terrorized spectator.[73]

Today's catastrophes are made-for-TV specials. It is commonplace to say we live in what Guy Debord called a *society of the spectacle* (*société du spectacle*): a world saturated by images, events mediated and disseminated for collective consumption. For Virilio, writing in *Ground Zero*, we are increasingly under threat from a totalitarianism of the image, a regime maintained by "simulators of proximity" (from television to the World Wide Web) that maintain us in an "imposture of immediacy" (41; trans. Turner). The old totalitarianisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries confused the individual body with an imaginary body politic; the totalitarianism of the image conflates individual perception with

prosthetic substitutes which render that very perception obsolete. The real (understood as the *here-and-now*: the proximate, the immediate, the empirical) is replaced by the *simulation* of the real. Thus the real comes to occupy the secondary position once held (we imagine) by the representation; as in the satisfaction peculiar to the tourist who "discovers" that the Eiffel Tower, or the Blue Mosque, or the Taj Mahal, does indeed look precisely like the image on the postcard. The image is no longer the mere supplement of the real (although our previous discussion ought to have shown us to what extent the supplement has always threatened to replace that which it "merely" supplemented), to which it refers, and by which it is authenticated. On the contrary, the real has come to be the supplement of the image. Like Fallaci transfixed before her television set, we first became cognizant of the events of September 11 as an image on a screen; the knowledge that this was an image of *something* that really happened came later, as an *afterthought*, as it were. "In this case, then, the real is added to the image like a bonus of terror, like an extra *frisson*. Not only is it terrifying but, what's more, it's real" ("Dans ce cas, donc, le réel s'ajoute à l'image comme une prime de terreur, comme un frisson de plus. Non seulement c'est terrifiant, mais en plus c'est réel") (*L'esprit du terrorisme* 39).

Such a moment confirms that it is no longer the real we seek, but the *effect of the real* (*effet de réel*), to borrow from Roland Barthes' term for the verisimilitude conferred on a narrative object by its lack of apparent "meaning" ("the very absence of the signified to the advantage of the referent alone becomes the signifier itself of realism" ("la carence même du signfié au profit du seul référent devient le signfiant même du réalisme") ("L'effet de réel" 186–87). Virilio addresses this same moment in *Ground Zero* thus: "As the attack on the World Trade Center was being broadcast live, many TV viewers believed they were watching one of those disaster movies which proliferate endlessly on our TV screens. It was by switching channels and finding the same pictures on all the stations that they finally understood that 'it was true'!" (38n53). Welcome to the republic of the image, by the image, and for the image.

Those who opine against the singularity of 9/11, arguing it was *just another catastrophe*, only one that transpired on American soil, are therefore wrong: for they fail to acknowledge what seems patently obvious, but which is, perhaps, in bad taste to acknowledge: that this catastrophe was an extravagantly *spectacular* one. From the perspective of both its perpetrators and its spectators, after all, 9/11 was a singularly *effective* catastrophe. This

was not simply because the planes hit their targets with such precision, but, rather, because we—the lucky ones not actually in the towers themselves—*watched* them doing so on television.

We are loathe to regard the events of 9/11 as a spectacle in its own right, the way we would view, let us say, a disaster movie on the same subject: it seems the very essence of moral indifference. I would argue that, on the contrary, unless we examine 9/11 as an image, unless we approach it as a formal object, we cannot hope to understand it and indeed are condemned to remain in thrall to its power.

In *L'esprit du terrorisme*, Baudrillard argues that the "spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of spectacle" ("Le spectacle du terrorisme impose le terrorisme du spectacle" 40). The Greek and Roman rhetoricians had another name for this terrorism of the spectacle: *sublimity*. All catastrophes, to one extent or another, are spectacles which overpower us in the manner of the sublime. For catastrophe always transpires in the manner of a cognitive assault; something—indeterminate, indistinct, unpredictable, and yet organized—takes us by surprise, overwhelming us with too much meaning or too little. One might argue that this is exactly how the *sublime* itself has always been understood. Not only is the catastrophic a species of the sublime; the

sublime, from its classical conception onwards, has been defined as a kind of *rhetorical catastrophe*: a semiotic event that appears to transcend or erase the semiotic. Already in Longinus' *On the Sublime* (*Peri hupsous*),[74] sublimity is both a genre *of* catastrophe (in the sublime, cataclysms are transformed into discursive entities, organized according to certain principles of combination, and are thereby subject, it would appear, to human control), and a catastrophe *for* genre (the sublime represents nothing, or represents the unrepresentable, and has no method; it is absolutely natural, or absolutely mystical: cataclysm converted magically into rhetorical effect, one designed not to communicate, but to overwhelm or transport). If rhetoric is the *conventional* semiotic weapon, designed to manipulate the interlocutor, sublimity is the semiotic gone *nuclear*. The sublime functions simultaneously as a super-semiotic and an anti-semiotic force; its goal is to overpower us or invest us with its power. This is a disaster, semiotically and psychologically speaking: meaning is raised to such transcendent heights that it is effectively erased. The same can be said for the reader upon whom this effect is unleashed. To be the target of the sublime, Longinus asserts, is to be both exalted and expunged: it is to enter the state of the ecstatic. It is to become Semele gazing upon the face of her

divine lover Zeus; an act in which transcendence and oblivion coincide.

Many were outraged and appalled at composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's now infamous characterization of 9/11 as "the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos" ("Attacks Called Great Art"). Leaving aside what one may consider either the spectacular clumsiness or calculated cruelty of the remark, a brief look at the context of the statement suggests, I would argue, that Stockhausen was paying tribute, in effect, to the power of the *sublime*: the violent but transformative force of catastrophe become organized spectacle. But what was it that Stockhausen actually said? In the course of a press conference in Hamburg on 16 September 2001 Stockhausen calls the attack on the World Trade Center

> … the greatest work of art there has ever been. That these individuals can achieve in one act what we in music could never even dream of, to practice madly for ten years, fanatically, for a concert. And then die…. And that is the greatest work of art that exists for the entire cosmos. Just think about what happened there. You have people who are so concentrated on this one performance, and then five thousand people are dispatched into the afterlife. In one moment. I couldn't do that. Compared to that, we are nothing, we composers.
>
> … das größte Kunstwerk,was es je gegeben hat. Daß also Geister in einem Akt etwas vollbringen, was wir in der Musik nie träumen könnten, daß Leute zehn Jahre üben wie verrückt, total fanatisch, für ein Konzert. Und dann sterben…. Und das ist das größte Kunstwerk, das es überhaupt gibt für den ganzen Kosmos. Stellen Sie sich das doch vor, was da passiert ist. Das sind also Leute, die sind so konzentriert auf dieses eine, auf die eine Aufführung, und dann werden fünftausend Leute in die Auferstehung gejagt. In einem Moment. Das könnte ich nicht. Dagegen sind wir gar nichts, also als Komponisten. ("'Huuuh!' Das Pressegespräch am 16 September 2001 im Senatszimmer des Hotel Atlantic in Hamburg" 76–77)

A moment later, in response to a follow-up question by a reporter, "Isn't there any difference between a work of art and a crime?" ("Gibt es keinen Unterschied zwischen Kunstwerk und Verbrechen?") Stockhausen replies: "It is a crime, you know, because the people did not agree

to it. They did not come to the concert. That is clear. And no one had announced to them: 'You could thereby be killed'" ("Der Verbrecher ist es deshalb, das wissen Sie ja, weil die Menschen nicht einverstanden waren. Die sind nicht in das Konzert gekommen. Das ist klar. Und es hat ihnen auch niemand angekündigt: 'Ihr könntet dabei drauf gehen'") (77). In fact Stockhausen acknowledges the force of an ethical imperative here, one that the terrorists have violated; but they have done so, he wants us to acknowledge, in spectacular fashion. After the outcry over his remarks Stockhausen tries to backtrack: he was, he assures us, speaking in the context of a discussion about evil; he had, in fact, asserted that 9/11 was a *Luciferian* work of art.

Given the public outcry that followed upon these remarks, Stockhausen appears to have spoken the unspeakable; and in doing so, he appears not only to have paid tribute to the sublime but succumbed to it.[75] The pious journalists who seek either to denounce Stockhausen's remarks or to justify them would have us believe that art and reality belong to two absolutely distinct worlds. Thus Anthony Tommasini writing in the *New York Times* on 30 September 2001:

> Even if you concede that Mr. Stockhausen meant to say that Lucifer was the creator behind the terrorist "work of art," his words are still an affront. Art may be hard to define, but whatever art is, it's a step removed from reality. A theatrical depiction of suffering may be art; real suffering is not. Because the art of photography often blurs this distinction, it can make us uncomfortable. Real people, sometimes suffering people, have been photography's unwitting subjects. That's why we have photojournalism, to keep things clearer. ("The Devil Made Him Do It")

Thank God, indeed, we have photojournalism, otherwise we might be confused! It is certainly far from clear that art is always "a step removed from reality"—a crudely debased mimetic theory that is, in any case, belied by Tommasini's own admission that photography sometimes "blurs this distinction," thereby making us "uncomfortable." That we have a category of photography called "photojournalism" surely does not solve the problem. Indeed, Stockhausen's remarks are predicated on the proposition that art and reality are often difficult to distinguish from each other. The sublime is a particularly egregious category, one that blurs the very distinction Tommasini would have us maintain. It is precisely because aesthetic principles are magnified and, indeed,

given murderous force in the sublime that the sublime work of art poses a threat to the ethical. There is always something apocalyptic, Stockhausen recognizes, in the sublime.[76]

It is because the terrorists acted as aestheticians, without regard for any or all ethical imperatives, that they were able to make 9/11 a "sublime" event. In other words, terrorists turn real life—and real people—into spectacle. It is this aestheticization of life that we find particularly horrifying in the act of the terrorist, and that, by the same token, gives that act its efficacy. In suicide bombings the devotion to spectacle is absolute, extending to victims and perpetrators alike. If this is art, it is, for the most part, very bad, art that lacks the texture, the complexity, of a "masterpiece" (Luciferian though it may be) such as 9/11. The suicide bomber adheres, more often than not, to a vulgar aesthetics: bigger is better, louder is more beautiful, etc. To this spectacle, however, the suicide bomber gives himself utterly, his very identity immolated in the spectacle he has unleashed. (One thinks here of Kafka's Hunger Artist, the Hungerkünstler, who turns the progressive deterioration of his own body into a spectacle for public consumption ["A Hunger Artist"]. The suicide bomber has this advantage: his performance is highly compressed, and therefore gains in intensity what it lacks in duration. Note

that it is because the tragedian has precisely the same advantage over the epic poet that Aristotle argues for the superiority of tragedy as a genre in the *Poetics*.[77])

It is only, perhaps, by treating 9/11 as an aesthetic performance that we can hope to appreciate the nature of the event. This sounds callous; but it is the only way, I think, to truly acknowledge the indignity suffered by the victims, who were nothing for the terrorists, after all, but material out of which to create a spectacle for others to watch. When 9/11 is approached thus, in formal terms, we can see that, once again, it is above all its binary structure that defines it. One refers to 9/11 as a unified spectacle; let us not forget, again, that there were two planes on 9/11, that this was a play in two acts. As a performance designed to have maximum impact upon its audience, this is crucial: the dramatic effect of the event (or events) is founded not on a single blow, but rather on a certain trajectory or modulation of terror: from the shock of the first plane, which arrives, unexpectedly, with all the force of a terrible and inexplicable theophany, to the epiphany of the second, which carries with it the explanation of the first. Recall that for Longinus sublimity itself is a twin entity: (1) a pure accident: a natural disaster in the discursive domain, an effect, in other words, that presents itself without

determinable causes or communicable rules;[78] and (2) a repeatable *techne* or *ars*, constructed according to systematic rules (even if the precise content of those rules remains elusive).[79] The two planes that struck the WTC (like the two bombs dropped on Japan) illustrate the same trajectory from accidentality to institutionality.

The terrifying accidentality of the sublime, Longinus tells us, is a carefully designed, "well-timed" effect (*On the Sublime* 1.4; trans. Fyfe). (That is why Longinus can write a book about it. *On the Sublime* is thus an instruction manual, in effect, on the art of creating controlled catastrophes, an art without discernable method.) That, too, is what the second plane tells us on 9/11.

CATASTROPHE AS TRAGEDY: THE REVERSAL OF THE SIGN

That all effects have their causes, that they are *well-timed*, is the proposition classical tragedy is designed to demonstrate. It may be that what happens to Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is inexplicable: an accident, or an act of God. It may be that what happens to him can be explained in too many ways, that it is determined by a causality reaching far back into the past. But what makes the *Oedipus* a *tragedy per se* is the way it moves as quickly as possible from the first proposition to the second.

As quickly as possible. Part of the secret of tragedy's success, for Aristotle, is its severe compression (*Poetics* 7, 1451a3–5; 26, 1462a18–1462b3): a tragedy, with its highly structured plot, can be comprehended all at once and as a unified whole, like the view of a landscape framed by a window (or a television screen). At the same time, the view through that window is beyond our powers

of apprehension, something that overwhelms us, like a semiotic blowout. Thus the sight of the sightless Oedipus at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus*; or the display of the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra at the close of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Tragedies often end in such tableaux, in which catastrophe is displayed as a formal spectacle. In this sense tragedy is a species of the sublime, or depends on the deployment of the sublime for the achievement of its objective.

What is that objective? Tragedy, for Aristotle, is the imitation of an "action" which is "serious" (performed by a hero, with catastrophic consequences for that hero), "complete" (unified by a logic of necessity), and of "sufficient size" (only long enough as is required for an action to reach its end), "exciting" both "pity and fear" and "designed to bring about the catharsis of such emotions" (6, 1449b24–28; trans. Gilbert). In their objectives, then, the terrorist and the tragedian have something in common; although the terrorist is perhaps rather more lacking when it comes to pity. (The comparison still stands: the author of an act of terrorism may be wanting in sympathy, but he must have a clear sense of how to generate that emotion in others.)

How, according to Aristotle, to maximize the spectator's pity and fear? Through a well-

constructed plot. The ideal plot, for Aristotle, is one which moves "from good fortune to bad fortune" (13, 1453a14), and by way of sudden moments of "*reversal*" (*peripeteia*) (1452a22)—catastrophic shifts in *fortune*, in effect, accompanied themselves by catastrophic shifts in *knowledge* (11, 1452a31–32). Aristotle refers to such a shift as *anagnōrisis*, or *recognition* (a sudden "change from ignorance to knowledge" [11, 1452a29–30; trans. Halliwell]). *Peripeteia* and *anagnōrisis* are, Aristotle tells us, "the chief things by means of which tragedy moves the feelings of the audience'" (6, 1450a32–33; trans. Gilbert). In them the hero is both taken by surprise, and by its opposite: the understanding that what happened *had* to have happened; the understanding, too, that the actions of the hero, even those designed to prevent what happened from happening, only helped to make it happen.[80] Blanchot, again, in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "If disaster means being separated from the star (if it means the decline which characterizes disorientation when the link with fortune from on high is cut), then it indicates a fall beneath disastrous necessity. Would law be the disaster? The supreme or extreme law, that is: the excessiveness of uncodifiable law—that to which we are destined without being party to it" (2). And yet we are party to it, whether we know it or not; that, too, is the

lesson of tragedy. In simple terms, we are not the master of our fate; fate, rather—what Blanchot calls here *the excessiveness of uncodifiable law*—is master over us.

The events that constitute 9/11 adhere closely to the requirements of tragedy as dictated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*; this helps to explain why it was so "effective" a "performance." I have already suggested that we attend to the terrorist attack as a spectacle, staged for an audience. But in the case of 9/11, it was an all too well-constructed plot, designed to elicit the maximum cathartic effect in its spectators through the mechanisms of reversal and recognition—mechanisms that are made visible, for example, in the sequence from first plane to second plane. The first plane could have been an accident; with the advent of the second plane *we* quickly *reversed* course, and *recognized* our mistake.

And so September 11 was instantly pronounced a "tragedy" by the public and the press. At the same time the persistent use of that term, and the reflexive deployment of certain ritual gestures of mourning (heroes eulogized, wreaths laid, last moments recollected), suggests a fundamental misconstrual of classical tragedy, one that has long dominated our views of drama in the West. In brief, we tend to approach tragedy primarily as the story

of a tragic hero who falls, instead of what Aristotle said it was: a case study in destiny or determinism embodied in the figure of a hero who falls.[81] Our response to death on a catastrophic and collective scale is thus in part the legacy of a long tradition of misreading Aristotle, a tradition that turns tragedy from a study in causality (one that is ultimately unfathomable, the law of a transcendent order) into an ethical fable, a justification, in essence, for why bad things happen to good people. But tragedies, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, are not moral tales. Looking for a moral lesson in the victims of September 11 is like trying to make sense of what happens to Oedipus by pointing to his "tragic flaw." But no such concept exists in the *Poetics*; "flaw" here is a crude rendering of the Greek *hamartia*, which refers to a *miscalculation* or *error* committed by the hero (13, 1453a9), and which does not necessarily attach to him any culpability.

Thus when cataclysm occurs in their midst, Americans tend to domesticate it, transforming the event into a plurality of individual, heroic, moral deaths: catastrophe becomes a collection of profiles in courage.[82] Thus the enormous popularity of the *New York Times* series "Portraits of Grief": 1800 thumbnail sketches of the dead and the missing which ran daily from 15 September to 31 December 2001, and which turned each of the

victims of September 11 into the hero of their own private tragedy.[83]

A reverse logic, but one equally constitutive of tragedy, appears to govern our representation of the perpetrators of the disaster. In the public imagination, the authors and actors of 9/11 remain faceless and anonymous, demonized and abstracted entities. But in this consignment to oblivion they assume, ironically enough, a far more powerful role than if we had simply thought of them as human beings doing terrible things: they become destiny itself, the very embodiment of causality as an incomprehensible and transcendent force. The personification of Osama bin Laden as the "face" of al Qaeda does not run contrary to this tragic logic; on the contrary, it extends it, by turning one man into the embodiment of an abstract and collective entity.[84] That construction is an example of the rhetorical gesture of *prosopopeia*: the animation of the inanimate, the lending of a *face* (*prosopon*) to that which is faceless or abstract. Osama bin Laden is a *prosopopeic* creation: less an individual *per se* than the *face* of evil itself.[85]

September 11 as a ritual spectacle, as a "tragedy" watched by an American "audience," continues to hew to the Athenian model. Classical tragedies were performed, of course, in theaters at municipal festivals. Today as an audience we affirm our

common civic identity in front of the television. There is less difference than might appear. When it comes to national crisis, television has proved an extraordinarily powerful medium for binding the populace together. Attic tragedy was, in fact, equipped with two audiences: one external to the drama, the spectators watching from the theater; and the second internal, sharing the stage with the characters, but passive observers of their actions: namely, the *chorus*. Television has its chorus, too: its newscasters, pundits, and commentators. This motley crew guiding us through the latest crisis *du jour* are there not so much to report, but to comment and console; to model for us, as it were, the various modes of fear, anger, and sympathy we are supposed to muster—precisely like the chorus in an Athenian tragedy. We need our anchormen or anchorwomen not to tell us what happened, but how to feel about it.

For Aristotle the ideal tragic hero, which is to say one whose story is most effective at eliciting emotions of pity and/or fear, is someone "not preeminent in virtue and justice," and "who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error" (13, 1453a7–9; trans. Halliwell)—a misstep (*hamartia*), committed either knowingly or unknowingly (the result is the same). Today the kings and queens of Attic drama are

replaced by firemen and housewives: people just like us, the decent folks next door; people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. "That could have been me," is what we say—and indeed, what Aristotle wants us to say—with a mixture of terror and relief after witnessing a tragedy.

Note that the best tragedies, for Aristotle, represent actions that are "complete" and "whole" (7, 1450b24–25; trans. Halliwell). A tragedy has an internal coherence to it, rendering it distinct from what precedes it, and what follows it. By *whole* Aristotle means "that which has a beginning, middle and end" (1450b25–26), each of these bound to the other by a causality that appears inexorable, if inscrutable. The "well-constructed plot," Aristotle asserts, "should neither begin nor end at an arbitrary point" (1450b31–33). It is chastening to think that the conversion of 9/11 into a war against a concrete enemy—whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran, or elsewhere—may have been driven by narrative considerations as much as political ones. (This is, in fact, precisely what distinguishes the neoconservative position from the pragmatic one: for neoconservatism treats history as a story, and its ultimate goal is to be on the winning side of that story.) A catastrophe on this scale had to have a clear explanation: it had to have *begun* somewhere.

A beginning, Aristotle tells us, "is that which does not follow necessarily from something else, but after which a further event or process naturally occurs" (1450b27-28). It is not clear such unambiguous beginnings exist in history. It is enough, for the tragedian, that the beginning *appears* not to follow necessarily from something else, that it is *likely* to lead to the next event; it is "through probability," Aristotle writes, "that the poet makes his material," even if based on "actual events" (9, 1451b30–32).[86] Aristotle refers, by way of an example, to a famous anecdote recited in antiquity, "when Mitys' statue at Argos killed the murderer of Mitys, by falling on him as he looked on it." Aristotle comments: "Such things *seem* not to occur randomly" (10, 1452a7–19; trans. Halliwell). That they seem not to is enough for the tragedian. But should it be enough for the historian? It is imperative for us that the events of 9/11 *seem* not to have occurred randomly. But in our search for a causal explanation, we fail to see that we thereby tend to frame the event in narrative terms, and transform the stuff of history into tragedy.

There is, moreover, no reason to expect why the *end* of 9/11 should be any less ambiguous than its *beginning*. Is the war on Iraq part of the events of 9/11? Aristotle defines an *end* as "that which itself naturally occurs … after a preceding event, but need

not be followed by anything else" (7, 1450b28–30). We know when a tragedy is over; real events do not come to a close with the same clarity. Attic tragedy, we have said, often came to an end with a presentation of the bodies of the victims presented as a formal *tableau*. Once can see why the search for the bodies in the ruins of the World Trade Center took on such enormous magnitude. Without the closure of a visible postmortem, the attack on New York threatened to turn into a play by Beckett instead of Sophocles, a work without a definitive end. And yet Beckett is not as far from Sophocles as one might think. Oedipus' story is far from over at the close of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, nor does the play offer any satisfying explanation, in the end, for why Oedipus has been made to suffer. In *Waiting for Godot*, meanwhile, Vladimir and Estragon appear trapped in a spatial and temporal limbo, waiting for a character who never arrives, at the mercy of forces they cannot identify, and over which they have no control. They are as blind and bewildered as Oedipus. That all of us are in this position is the lesson classical tragedy has to offer. (And indeed, it is how we conduct ourselves in the face of such knowledge that determines whether or not we are a hero.)

Sophocles' play concludes, like many a tragedy, with a parting pedantic commonplace on the

uncertainties of fortune, courtesy of the Chorus:

> Look upon that *last* [*teleutaian*] *day* [*hēmeran*] always. *Count* [in Jebb's translation, *call*] no mortal happy [*olbizein*; in Liddell and Scott, to *deem* or *pronounce happy*] till / he has passed the *final limit of his life* [*terma tou biou*] secure from pain. (1528–30; trans. Grene)

And yet there is an apocalyptic wisdom in the last commonplace of the Chorus of the *Oedipus* that goes beyond the gnomic: the recognition that all our pronouncements, all our accountings, must be counted as contingent until the time for counting is over. Look upon that last day, yes; but do not presume to know when that last day shall be.

NOTES

1 This is, in fact, the second definition of the noun *accidens* in Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary*, the first being the "*accidental*, *nonessential quality* of any thing, *to sumbebēkos*." *Sumbebēkos* is standard Greek, within the philosophical tradition, for the attribute of an object as distinct from its essence. That these two significations belong to the same signifier is, it goes without saying, *no accident*. And yet one is presented here, in fact, with a hierarchy of significations that is itself contingent upon the distinction between the *essential* (first definition) and the *accidental* (second definition). One of the aims of this essay is to suggest that this hierarchy ought to be reversed, and that what has traditionally been considered essential to the accident is in fact an accidental feature of its essence. It is because the attributes of an object are considered to *befall* it, in the manner of an accident (second definition), that they can be considered *accidents* (first definition) in the first place, and receive the name thereof.

2 One runs here into the same hierarchy of meanings as in the noun; this is already a figurative extension of *accido*'s primary and literal meaning, which, according to Lewis and Short, is "to *fall upon* or *down upon* a thing, *to reach* it *by falling*." In this sense the *accident* is intrinsically *catastrophic*: from *katastrophē*, an *overturning*.

3 The following explanatory note is attached to Lewis and Short's entry on *accido*: "The distinction between the syn.

evenio, *accido*, and *contingo* is this: *evenio*, i.e. *ex-venio*, is used of either fortunate or unfortunate events: *accido*, of occurrences which take us by surprise; hence it is used either of an indifferent, or, which is its general use, of an unfortunate occurrence: *contingo*, i.e. *contango*, indicates that an event accords with one's wishes; and hence is generally used of fortunate events. As Isid. says, *Differ*. 1: *Contingunt* bona: *accidunt* mala: *eveniunt* utraque." The reference to the medieval theologian and encyclopedist Isidore of Seville's *Differentiarum libri*, or *Books of Differences*, reminds us that it is difficult to separate the *indifferent* nature of an event from its *maleficent* character; it is *because* an event is indifferent that it appears maleficent, notwithstanding the existence of *happy accidents* (the very phrase suggesting a marked or exceptional version of an otherwise unmarked and therefore essential category).

4 All translations in this essay are by author unless otherwise noted.

5 *Rupture*: according to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, from the Latin *ruptura*, meaning *fracture* or *break*; from *ruptus*, past participle of *rumpere*, *to break*.

6 In an article that appeared in the *New York Times* on the occasion of the first anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice's recollections of the moment when she learned of the attack insist on the attribute of the accidental: "I was standing here, and when my aide said it—a plane struck

the World Trade Center—I said, 'What a horrible accident.' … So I called the president—he was in Florida—and he also thought what a terrible accident" (David E. Sanger, "Where They Were: Frozen in Memory, the First Moments of a Transformed World"). To have thought, with regard to the first plane, "that it was an accident" is a standard feature of this event's recollection, and recited now with almost formulaic piety. In Danielle Hyman's recollections as recorded on a memorial website entitled "Remember September 11, 2001" the accident is framed as a deflection or suspension of the linear sequentiality of an ordinary day: "That morning I drove my daughter to school since I was off from work, I dropped off my rent check—which was late (smile), and I went to the supermarket. I was in Western Beef in the Bronx on 149th Street [when] I heard everyone talking about the news of a plane having hit the World Trade Center. I thought to myself, that's awful and I thought it was an accident."

7 The allegorical interpretations of fundamentalist religious groups constitute simply the crudest and most literal version of this epiphanic reading. One website, entitled "Pray For the Peace of Jerusalem," focuses on Revelation 9:11, asking: "Does this verse hold a timely warning to all mankind or is it simply a coincidence of numbers?"

8 In a paper presented on 22 May 2009 at Kadir Has University, video artist Walid Raad noted the obsessive motif, in accounts of 9/11, of the idyllic weather prior to the attack, the perfect serenity of a blue sky. "But what kind

of blue was it?" Raad asked, "Azure? Indigo? Cerulean?" ("Sweet Talk").

9 Captain John E. Lacouture, USN (Ret), an Assistant Engineer on the USS *Blue* at Pearl Harbor, recalls being woken up with the phrase "Wake up, wake up! The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor!" in his ear ("Oral Histories of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941: Captain John E. Lacouture, USN").

10 December 7, 1941; November 22, 1963; September 11, 2001: the holy trinity of catastrophe in the American collective consciousness. Drawing parallels between Pearl Harbor, the assassination of JFK, and the attack on the WTC is now practically *de rigueur*. David Sanger begins his article on Condoleeza Rice thus: "Sometimes a single, awful event can stop and shake a nation so thoroughly that, years later, all its citizens can recall precisely where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Dec. 7, 1941, was such a day. So was Nov. 22, 1963. Now there is Sept. 11, 2001." Andrea Brown's interview of survivors of Pearl Harbor in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of 9/11 emphasizes the parallels between the events: "Then roaring planes tore across the sunny skies, turning the tranquil day into a nightmare of death and destruction.... 'We were not expecting that,' Elmo Clark said. Those words could describe the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, but these men refer to another ill-fated day, one that came 60 years earlier: Dec. 7, 1941, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.... Clark was an 18-year-old

teletype operator at Hickam Field in Honolulu when he was 'bombed out of bed' on that clear morning in 1941. He was just as startled on Sept. 11, 2001, when his wife called him to come see the live news report on television. 'My wife said, "Sweetie, you better look at this," Clark said.' 'From then on we were glued to the TV.... The nation as a whole was in a state of shock. It was almost like when Kennedy was assassinated. Things came to a halt' ... Frank Mack, who dodged the bullets of Pearl Harbor ... saw 9/11 as a wake-up call.... Walt Himmelberg, who was wounded at Pearl Harbor, said 9/11 resurrected old feelings of fear and disbelief. 'You see planes, you don't know what's happening,' Himmelberg said. 'One crashes and you think, "Oh my god, an accident." You see another one and you suddenly realize, "Man, are we starting another Pearl Harbor?"'" ("Vets Compare, Contrast Pearl Harbor, 9/11").

11 Two other twentieth-century events, Hiroshima and the Holocaust, are also regularly invoked in discussions of 9/11, but not, for obvious reasons, with regard to their accidentality. The parallels with these events are considered later in this essay.

12 From the Latin *evenire*, *to happen*, *to come out*; from *ex, out* + *venire*, *to come*.

13 In this scenario one can discern, despite Virilio's assertion of the modernity of the global accident, the shadow of another fallen tower built out of hubris: "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for

ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4).

14 *Apocalypse*: from the Greek *apokaluptō*; in Liddell and Scott, to *disclose*, to *reveal*.

15 According to Smyth's *Greek Grammar*: "Two or more sentences (or words) independent in form and thought, but juxtaposed, *i.e.* coordinated without any connective, are *asyndetic* (from *asundeton, not bound together*), and such absence of connectives is *asyndeton*" (484).

16 The tropes of scission and segmentation in representations of the first moment of the attack on the WTC are recurrent; thus, from James Barron's essay commemorating the second anniversary of 9/11 on 11 September 2003, "Another 9/11, and the Nation Mourns Again": "At the White House, President Bush and his staff observed a moment of silence at 8:46 a.m., the time the first plane sliced into the north tower."

17 September 11 appears to have turned us all into Americans, at least in the initial wake of the attack; by which I mean to say that it revealed a camaraderie born, not out of kindred national identities, but common apocalyptic fantasies. Recall Jean-Marie Colombani's famous editorial that appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde* the day after the attack: "We Are All Americans" ("Nous sommes tous Américains").

18 The trope remains ubiquitous. An article in the *Indianapolis Star* from 24 January 2004 reviewing the events of September 11 is entitled "The Day Everything Changed." For the more parochial version, see the speech made by

Senator Dianne Feinstein on the floor of the Senate on the second anniversary of the event, "Reflecting on 9/11—America Will Never Be the Same."

19 I cite in passing here the title of a children's book entitled *Things Will Never Be the Same*. A reader's review of the book on Amazon's website by Elaine Lesh Morgan concludes: "The book's title comes from the last chapter in which the author remembers the impact on his family of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Children who remember 9/11 will identify with his feeling that 'things will never be the same.'"

20 In an article in the *New York Times* on the general mood of the American public during the 2008 presidential primaries, "Voters Show Darker Mood Than in 2000," Kevin Sack writes: "Certainly, some Americans remain bullish. Charles K. Spencer, a 71-year-old investment adviser who lives in the Kansas City suburbs, said he was 'unabashedly optimistic' about the future facing his four grandchildren.... But the more common theme, that of innocence lost, was voiced by Erwin L. Eppie, 54, and his wife, Fumiyo, 64, who were in Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, and saw the smoke rising from the Pentagon. 'We said that day that our grandchildren will grow up in a different world, assuming the worst about people instead of the best....'"

21 A reference to the refrain of W. B. Yeats' poem "Easter 1916."

22 John L. O'Sullivan's famous essay "The Great Nation of Futurity," written in 1839, is perhaps the iconic statement of this futurist credo: "We have, in reality, but little connection

with … past history … and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity" (426). On O'Sullivan's vision of manifest destiny see Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (30–31).

23 Hence the role played by collective celebrations of trauma in various national traditions, such as Holocaust Day in Israel, or "National Humiliation Day" in China. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books* on China's thin-skinned sense of national pride in the context of the 2008 Olympics, Orville Schell wrote: "As a result of the insulting terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, by which the West cravenly gave Germany's concessions in China to Japan, an expression, *wuwang guochi*, 'Never forget our national humiliation,' became a common slogan in China. Indeed, to ignore China's national failure came to be seen as unpatriotic. Since then, Chinese historians and ideological overseers have never ceased to mine China's putative past sufferings 'to serve the political, ideological, rhetorical, and/or emotional needs of the present,' as the historian Paul Cohen has put it.… In 2001, the National People's Congress even passed a law proclaiming an official 'National Humiliation Day.' (However, so many historical dates were proposed that delegates could not agree on any one, and thus, no day was designated, although one of the leading candidates is now September 18, the day in 1931 that Japan began its invasion of Manchuria.)"

24 A dream that depends on the logic of the *hermeneutic circle*, as described by Schleiermacher, in which, to one degree or another, setting out to understand something is, in effect, the same as having already understood it.

25 Hence the prodigious success of Christian sci-fi thrillers like Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (1995). Meanwhile, the color-coded Homeland Security Warning System, implemented post-9/11 (and phased out in 2011), obliges Americans to live in a permanent state of vigilance; as if the apocalypse is always about to happen.

26 Blanchot: "When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is in its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment" (1–2).

27 "A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it" (1450b25–30;

trans. Bywater).

28 A bromide the truth of which is illustrated by Thomas Hoepker's *Young People on the Brooklyn Waterfront on September 11*, and which looks like a parody of Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Hoepker's photograph was first published in 2006; but it was Frank Rich's column "Whatever Happened to the America of 9/12?" in the *New York Times*, which reads the image as an allegory on American amnesia, that put it in the public spotlight. Rich's reference to the image is a piece of exegesis posing as empirical ekphrasis: "It shows five young friends on the waterfront in Brooklyn, taking what seems to be a lunch or bike-riding break, enjoying the radiant late-summer sun and chatting away as cascades of smoke engulf Lower Manhattan in the background." Note that Rich's reading depends on viewing the events of 9/11 as an interruption of the genre of the idyllic; it is because the actors in this scene fail to acknowledge that interruption that Rich condemns them as archetypal Americans. (See Walid Raad above on this stock reading of 9/11 as idyll interrupted.) But note, too, that this reading itself depends on the same refusal to acknowledge the catastrophic logic of interruption, upon which photography (as opposed to painting)—as well as its reading—depends: it can only succeed by detaching the moment from its context. The various rebuttals to Rich's column represent so many efforts to reinsert the moment in a narrative matrix. Thus the photographer himself, in one of a series of responses to Rich's column printed in *Slate* magazine, "I Took That 9/11 Photo Frank Rich Wrote About," acknowledges the ambiguity of the moment, and wonders "was it just the devious lie of a snapshot, which ignored the seconds before and after I had clicked the shutter?"

29 Or *overflows*. *Overspilling* and *overflowing*: forms of contagion. Such contagion was traditionally understood as an *influenza*: a flowing or overflowing (from *influo*; in Lewis and Short, *to flow* or *run into*). And thus to Deleuze and Guattari's list of cognates that function as plateaus in *A Thousand Plateaus* (a *plateau* being a constitutive element of a *rhizome*, that which "is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end" [1605]), "RHIZOMATICS = SCHIZOANALYSIS = PRAGMATICS = MICROPOLITICS," I would add "= VIROLOGY = CONTAGION = CONSPIRACY," etc.

30 Peter Knight notes, in *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-files*, that "previous fears about invasion of the body politic have mutated into an everyday panic about the viral infiltration of the body itself" (4), and devotes an entire chapter to the subject (168–203). But critics tend to overlook contagion as the constitutive feature of the conspiratorial mode; that there is a *viral style*. Despite the title of Daniel Pipes' *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, Pipes never identifies paranoia as an identifiable *style*. Knight, similarly, nowhere identifies the essential features of what he calls the "new conspiracy style," the ascendancy of which he ties specifically to the assassination of Kennedy

as "an inevitably ambiguous point of origin for a loss of faith in authority and coherent causality—the primal scene, as it were, of a postmodern sense of paranoia" (4). I am not making, needless to say, the same argument with regard to 9/11, which I regard not as an event that changes things (dividing them into a *before* and an *after*), but a demonstration of the *event* itself (as that which divides a *before* from an *after*).

31 I am reminded here of the traditional distinction drawn by modern historians between Thucydides as the father of scientific history, and Herodotus as the primordial historian in an originary and archaic sense. In fact, the distinction, as it is generally drawn, rests not on the presence or absence of deterministic thinking, but on the restriction or expansion of the deterministic principle. In *Thucydides and the Science of History*, Charles Norris Cochrane characterizes Thucydides' objectivity as the strict adherence to a "scientific method" (166), defined as a rigid determinism: the "originality of Thucydides lies … in his attempt to bring *all human action* within the realm of natural causes" (17). Cochrane sees the origins of this deterministic framework, interestingly for our purposes here, in Hippocratic medicine, whose methods Thucydides has transposed to the domain of history (16). In both the medical and the historical domain, the primary law is the "doctrine of causality" (4). The contrast drawn by Cochrane between Thucydides and Herodotus emphasizes their shared reliance on causality

as an essential principal; it is not that Herodotus does not believe in causality, it is that his causality includes within its domain the supernatural as well as the natural (17); Herodotus' causality is too comprehensive.

32 From the perspective of the terrorists, Baudrillard points out in *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, these buildings were *worth destroying* (50; trans. Turner). For Baudrillard, the horror of dying in them must be compared to the horror of living or working in them (45).

33 Chomsky would not characterize the events of 9/11 as a response to globalization or the cultural hegemony of the West; but he does describe it, for example in the collection of interviews entitled simply *9/11*, as a natural consequence of specific American policies. The event therefore obeys, as Virilio and others suggest it does, a kind of reciprocal or suicidal logic. Chomsky is closer to Baudrillard than he would probably want to admit when, in considering the merits of a "so-called war on terrorism," he argues, "We should recognize that in much of the world the U.S. is regarded as a leading terrorist state, and with good reason" (23); or when, in response to the question, "The attacks have been called an act of hate. Where do you think this hate comes from?" he asserts: "For the radical Islamists mobilized by the CIA and its associates, the hate is just what they express. The U.S. was happy to support their hatred and violence when it was directed against U.S. enemies; it is not happy when the hatred it helped nurture is directed against the U.S. and its allies, as it has been,

repeatedly, for 20 years" (80). Determining causality and assigning blame depends, in the end, on how close we are to the event: the farther we pull back, the larger and more diffuse the event itself.

34 A recurrent motif in science fiction fantasies of the settlement of Mars, as in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, or its *terraforming*, as in Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*.

35 Consider the title of the 24 April 2009 segment of *Larry King Live*, devoted to sociopaths and serial killers: "The Killer among Us." The segment included questions posed such as "Do you ever know who your next door neighbor is?" One of its guests was a "Dr. Martha Stout, psychologist" and "author of *The Sociopath Next Door*." Dr. Drew Pinsky, guest host for the segment, began with this introduction: "Tonight, a Sunday school teacher accused of raping and killing her own child's friend. A clean-cut medical student, one minute planning his wedding and the next charged with a savage murder of a woman who advertised herself on the Internet. Did anyone suspect that these everyday people might be capable of such heinous crimes? How much do you really know about your favorite waiter, the woman at work, or the person beside you in bed? What are the warning signs of a dark, even deadly side? And what if there is no way to tell?" Let me cite Baudrillard from *L'esprit du terrorisme*: "In what is the height of deceit, they [the terrorists] even used the banality of everyday American life as a mask and a masquerade. Sleeping in

their suburbs, studying with their families, before waking up like time-delayed bombs. The flawless mastery of this clandestineness is almost as terrorizing as the spectacular act of September 11. For it casts suspicion on every individual: isn't anybody, no matter how inoffensive, a potential terrorist? If *they* were able to pass undetected, well then we are all potential criminals (every plane also becomes suspect), and in the end that, no doubt, is the case" ("Comble de ruse, ils ont même utilisé la banalité de la vie quotidienne américaine comme masque et double jeu. Dormant dans leurs banlieus, lisant et étudiant en famille, avant de se réveiller comme des bombes à retardement. La maîtrise sans faille de cette clandestinité est presque aussi terroriste que l'acte spectaculaire du 11 septembre. Car elle jette la suspicion sur n'importe quel individu: n'importe quel être inoffensif n'est-il pas un terroriste en puissance? Si ceux-là ont pu passer inaperçus, alors chacun de nous est un criminal inaperçu (chaque avion devient lui aussi suspect), et au fond c'est sans doute vrai") (28).

36 This airplane appears as a *divine messenger*, a winged Hermes, and the office it performs is that of hermeneutics. An apocalyptic office, as Heidegger describes it in "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer": "Hermes is the divine messenger. He brings the message of destiny; *hermēneuein* [in Liddell and Scott, *hermēneuō*, *interpret* or *translate*] is that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message" (29; trans. Hertz). But note the tortured, tortuous

construction here (*that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message*; in the original, *jenes Darlegen, das Kunde bringt, insofern es auf eine Botschaft zu hören vermag* ["Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache: Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden" 121]), in which the content of the message Hermes carries is never revealed, but repeatedly transferred, transmitted. Hermes presides not over the telling of the truth, but its transportation.

37 Thus Baudrillard writes in *L'esprit du terrorisme*: "Terrorism, like a virus, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion [or *drip*] of terrorism, which is like the shadow cast by any system of domination, everywhere ready to wake up like a double agent. There is no longer any line of demarcation which allows one to outline it, it is at the very heart of this culture which combats it, and the visible fracture (and hatred) which, on the global level, opposes the exploited and the underdeveloped to the Western world is secretly linked to the fracture internal to the dominant system. This system can face any visible antagonism. But against the other, of viral structure—as if every apparatus of domination secreted its own antibody, the fermentation of its own disappearance—, against this form of almost automatic reversal of its own power, the system can do nothing. And terrorism is the shock wave of this silent reversal" ("Le terrorisme, comme le virus, est partout. Il y a une perfusion mondiale du terrorisme, qui est comme l'ombre portée de tout système de domination, prêt partout

à se réveiller comme un agent double. Il n'y a plus de ligne de démarcation qui permette de le cerner, il est au coeur même de cette culture qui le combat, et la fracture visible (et la haine) qui oppose sur le plan mondiale les exploités et les sous-développés au monde occidentale rejoint secrètement la fracture interne au système dominant. Celui-ci peut faire front à tout antagonisme visible. Mais contre l'autre, de structure virale—comme si tout appareil de domination sécrétait son antidispositif, son propre ferment de disparition—, contre cette forme de réversion presque automatique de sa propre puissance, le système ne peut rien. Et le terrorisme est l'onde de choc de cette réversion silencieuse") (17).

38 The "Uncle Sam Wants You" poster was designed by James Montgomery Flagg, and first published in 1916. See "The Most Famous Poster" at the *American Treasures of the Library of Congress* website.

39 "What, exactly," asks William Neuman, in an article in the *New York Times* on 7 January 2008 ("In Response to M.T.A.'s 'Say Something' Ads, a Glimpse of Modern Fears"), "did those 1,944 New Yorkers see, and what did they say?" What "something" refers to must, in this logic of hermeneutic vigilance, remain indefinite. Hermeneutics is now the instrument of a culture of surveillance that must be maintained at all costs. "Presumably," Neuman continues, "no active terror plots were interrupted, or that would have been announced by the authorities." Note, too, the glaring contrast between the precision of the number of

times New Yorkers putatively saw and said something, and the lack of specificity in regard to what they saw and said: "Where did the number 1,944 come from?" Neuman asks: "Police and transit officials could not say exactly." In fact what is significant about this number is not its accuracy but the appearance thereof; a rhetorical effect (akin to what Roland Barthes has referred to as the "reality effect" ["L'effet de réel"]) which lends credibility to its magnitude. Christopher P. Boylan, "a deputy executive director of the authority," says as much in his explanation, or lack thereof, of the origin of the number 1,944: "Mr. Boylan said he did not know exactly how the authority had come up with the number. 'I don't want to say that the accuracy of the number is secondary to the message,' Mr. Boylan said, 'but the message that we wanted to get across is that those calls are, in fact, having an impact.'" What the principal impact of those calls would be Mr. Boylan does not say, but it would appear to be the making of more calls.

40 A rather insidious instance of Schleiermacher's *hermeneutic circle*, where, to put it crudely, the meaning of the part is contingent upon that of the whole, and vice versa; thus, from the "Outline of the 1819 Lectures": "Complete knowledge is contained within an apparent circle, so that every extraordinary thing can only be understood in the context of the general of which it is a part, and vice versa" (621; trans. Wojcik and Haas). It is not that one can avoid the hermeneutic circle, which, for Schleiermacher, is part of the structure of all knowledge; but in this case the circle

functions naively, driven by what Schleiermacher calls "careless interpretation" as opposed to the true "art" of understanding: "Careless interpretation distinguishes only the [predetermined] sense from the manner of expression, which in fact depend on each other for their mutual identity, the determination of which is the minimum requirement for avoiding artless practice" (620). The "careless practice of the art results from the fact that understanding is pursued in the light of a negative goal: that misunderstanding should be avoided" (619). But misunderstanding ought not to be avoided; it is an indispensable part of understanding. One can see why "[c]areless interpretation tends to limit its understanding to obtaining easy-to-attain goals" (620); as in the MTA campaign outlined above, it offers the allure of dependably self-fulfilling prophecies. On the hermeneutic circle in the work of Schleiermacher and its impact on later philosophical writings, see Richard E. Palmer's *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

41 Even the apparently objective assertions of academic enquiry can serve to amplify or multiply the very object they purport to isolate and analyze. Consider the opening sentence of Peter Knight's *Conspiracy Culture*: "At the turn of the millennium in America it seems that conspiracy theories are everywhere" (1), which would appear to confirm the very pathology it seeks to identify. The same contagion is visible in Knight's assertion, already cited above, that "fears about invasion of the body politic have

mutated into an everyday panic about the viral infiltration of the body" (4). Wordplay of this order may be "innocent," and overdetermined by the stylistic protocols of academic writing; it nevertheless represents a form of collaborating with the enemy.

42 The proliferation, in the wake of 9/11, of *transparent* backpacks and pocketbooks (cited by Walid Raad in his paper presented at Kadir Has University on 22 May 2009) suggests another symptom of this suspension of the interpretive faculty; here one can see fulfilled the fantasy of the sign that no longer needs to be read: it has been read in advance.

43 That the original "If you see something, say something" MTA campaign indeed tended to dull, rather than sharpen the hermeneutic faculties seems to be borne out by the revision of that campaign in 2004, as reported by Michael Luo in the *New York Times*: "The posters have been around for a while now on subway cars, buses and trains, an accepted part of the decor of New York life in this age of orange alerts and terrorism fears. In big, bold type, they read, 'If You See Something, Say Something,' meaning anything suspicious that might be an explosive device masquerading as something else. Now, to make the request a little clearer, transit officials plan to update their advertising campaign starting next week, by offering actual pictures of what they mean by 'something.' They are images of seemingly benign objects—a greasy paper bag under a train seat, an elegant black briefcase on a platform, a bulging blue garbage bag stashed under a station bench—except for the fact that they are sitting by themselves. 'Be suspicious of anything unattended,' the posters say" ("M.T.A. Sharpens a Get-Suspicious Campaign"). According to the MTA's own online newsletter (*The MTA Newsroom*), the catchphrase "If you see something, say something" was followed by "*more specific reminders* that helped make riders aware that they could help improve system security by being alert to such objects as unattended packages or luggage" ("MTA Rolls Out 'The Eyes of New York' Ad Campaign"; italics mine).

44 Peter Knight's description, in *Conspiracy Culture*, of conspiracy theories in the wake of the assassination of JFK suggests this simultaneous proliferation and flattening of meaning, a normalization of the conspiratorial: "Conspiracy theories . . . are now less likely to give vent to alarmist fears about an occasional interruption of the normal order of things, than to express a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the normal order of things amounts to a conspiracy. The style of conspiracy culture has accordingly changed from a rigid conviction about a particular demonized enemy, to a cynical and generalized sense of the ubiquity—and even the necessity—of clandestine, conspiring forces in a world in which everything is connected. Certainty has given way to doubt, and conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone" (3). The conclusion here is exactly wrong, however, and belied by Knight's own assertions: for it is rather doubt that has given way to certainty: the

certainty that everything is in doubt.

45 We seem to have entered the world, here, of J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*: a world based on the absolute reification of paranoia, visible as a contagion of mimesis. Because everything in the universe of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is code, a revelatory or apocalyptic object, every thing is therefore the sign of every other thing: landscapes are mirrors of the body; the body is a second landscape. In "War-Zone D," Dr. Nathan observes a billboard displaying what looks like "a section of sand dune. Looking at it more closely, Dr. Nathan realized that in fact it was an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest. Glancing at the billboards, Dr. Nathan recognized other magnified fragments: a segment of lower lip, a right nostril, a portion of female perineum, each represented as a formal geometric pattern" (15). The landscapes of Eniwetok (site of the first hydrogen bomb test in 1952) and Dealey Plaza figure as recurrent primal obsessions with apocalyptic readings: thus in "The Plaza," "Dealey Plaza in Dallas" is "re-imagined in Talbot's eye as the end of the world" (22); but a moment later we return to the "descending triangle of the plaza" now "repeated in the facial geometry of [a] young woman" (23). Here, as everywhere in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, we are witness to the *apocalypse of substance* itself.

46 Baudrillard, in *L'esprit du terrorisme*, appears to confirm the singularity of 9/11, referring to the attack on the WTC as "the absolute event, the 'mother' of events … the pure event which contains in it all the events which never happened" ("l'événement absolu, la 'mère' des événements … l'événement pur qui concentre en lui tous les événements qui n'ont jamais eu lieu") (9–10). The *pure event*, as such, represents a rupture with history itself. Such an event would seem to cast us in the realm of the *postmodern*, as understood by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, as a generalized "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv; trans. Bennington and Massumi); 9/11 appears to render all such metanarratives—and indeed all narratives *tout court*—obsolete. But it seems hard, after 9/11, to view the postmodern itself as anything but another grand metanarrative, disguised as its negation. The response to 9/11 gives the lie to Lyotard's claim that "Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative" (360). For the very rejection of narrative that 9/11 appears to enjoin upon us is but the oldest of narratives.

47 Consider the title of the speech delivered by Jan Egeland, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., 11 September 2004: "From Holocaust to 9/11: Responding to Today's Victims of Terror."

48 One will recall the scene in the 1999 film *The Matrix* when Neo, observing the precise repetition of the movements of a black cat, exclaims, "Whoa … déjà vu!" Trinity immediately recognizes in this uncanny repetition the signs of an imminent crisis in the system: "A déjà vu is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something." One might pursue this structure of the return

of the uncanny in the events of 9/11 which, like the "dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses" referred to by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident" (30; trans. Strachey)—the patient in this case being the spectator.

49 The 28 April 2009 appearance of Air Force One flying unusually low over the New York City skyline (for the purposes, it turned out, of a photo op) seemed to point to a recurrence of the same catastrophe and the same contagion: "as the low-flying Boeing 747 speeded in the shadows of skyscrapers, trailed by two fighter jets, the sight … awakened barely dormant fears of a terrorist attack, causing a momentary panic that sent workers pouring out of buildings on both sides of the Hudson River" (A. G. Sulzberger and Matthew L. Wald, "Jet Flyover Frightens New Yorkers"). The panic unleashed by this event (and the employment of the word *dormant*) suggests that the citizenry of New York have developed an extensive and highly sensitive system of antibodies to this pathogen; or that they are preternaturally allergic to what would otherwise be an innocuous object.

50 That *parousia* refers, according to Liddell and Scott, both to *presence* and *arrival* (of visiting dignitaries, generally, in antiquity), prefigures Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of Christianity in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* as a religion founded entirely, not on finality *per se*, but our faith in an end endlessly deferred. *Parousia*, according to this reading, is no longer the principle of a presence to come; it does not depend upon the return of the Messiah; it is, rather, faith in the traces of the past and of the future in the present—a faith in *non-presence*, a faith that sounds uncannily like Derrida's principle of *differance* before the fact. To the extent that Nancy's reading of *parousia* challenges the notion of meaning as something singular and fully present, it supports this reading of catastrophe as eternal return.

51 Catastrophe as the return of catastrophe: not the assassination of JFK, then, to turn to another favorite example of the "singularity of the extreme"; rather, the assassinations of MLK, RFK, and JFK, viewed collectively, as single or singular event.

52 From *Of Grammatology*: "I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire for such a [transcendental] signified" (49; trans. Spivak). On the myth of the Golden Age, see Hesiod, *Works and Days* 2.109–126, and Virgil, *Georgics* 1.125–8, 2.532–40.

53 Thus John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." To what extent this gesture of redemption depends on the structure of the *antidote* is evident in Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (that is to say, taking upon himself that curse that had been formerly ours).

54 The comparison is an old one, much favored by Christian fundamentalists. An anonymous article posted on the internet, but apparently written just after the start of the Gulf War, declares, "The descendants of the Babel builders are still with us today. Their plan for creating a 'global society' is evident in their various writings." Their chief monument, according to the author, is not the World Trade Center, but the United Nations. It was to forge a "new world order" that "the tower on the Plain of Shinar" was built; so, too, "the one on New York's East River" ("Revelation 9").

55 The term *ground zero* was first used, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, immediately after the end of the Second World War to describe the epicenter of the atomic bomb blast in Hiroshima. The term is now uniformly used to refer to the site of the WTC.

56 It is no wonder that from the very beginning, plans for rebuilding at the site of the former WTC, overseen by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, were mired in controversy. It is, indeed, business as usual in New York City. The BBC's Stephen Evans writes, by way of explanation, that "Ground Zero is many things—a mass grave, a field of memories, a political symbol—but it is also prime real estate at the heart of the financial capital of the world" ("Rebuilding Begins at Ground Zero"). But at the heart of the debate is the essential tension between inscription and erasure, memory and amnesia: is rebuilding a way of remembering or forgetting the past? One could argue here that the inability simply to *move forward* suggests

a paralysis brought on by too much *memory*, that is to say, too much *meaning*. This is essentially David Brooks' diagnosis of the delays in his 13 October 2011 column "The Thing Itself": "There was a lot of planning but not much execution. Symbolism eclipsed reality." Chris Ward, hired by Governor David Paterson to take over the Port Authority, "rescued the ground zero project by disenchanting it, by seeing it as it is, not through shrouds of symbols"—by attempting, in other words, to drain the site of meaning.

57 There was, of course, a perfunctory debate over whether to rebuild or leave the site empty, but according to an update in the *New York Times*, "9/11 Reconstruction": "The owner of the site, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and the leaseholder, the developer Larry A. Silverstein, insisted that the 11 million square feet of offices and commercial space destroyed in the attacks be replaced." Ground zero was many things, but it never stopped being a very valuable piece of real estate.

58 A 2012 progress report (*World Trade Center*) from the leaseholder of the site of the WTC, Silverstein Properties, is trapped between the rhetoric of past and future. On the one hand, the goal "is a grand new urban center for 21st-century New York"; on the other hand, this new WTC represents a "21st-Century Renaissance." To build it is to say, in the words of Janno Lieber, President of WTC Properties, in a video that forms part of the report, "We're back."

59 Note this description, from its official website, of the National September 11 Memorial, designed by Michael Arad

and Peter Walker, and which was open to the public on 12 September 2011: "The Memorial's twin reflecting pools are each nearly an acre in size and feature the largest manmade waterfalls in … North America. The pools sit within the footprints where the Twin Towers once stood" ("About the Memorial"). The reference to the *footprints* of the WTC is *de rigueur* in descriptions of ground zero, and suggests the way we reflexively read ruins as *signs* of a missing referent. To the extent that the 9/11 Memorial is constituted, not as a structure that occupies space, but as a sign of what is now absent from it, it may be said to *put* that missing referent *under erasure*.

60 "*The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the differance* which opens appearance [*l'apparaître*] and signification" (65).

61 Derrida writes that "differance defers-differs [*diffère*]" (66).

62 It is the *a* instead of the *e* which gives *différance* the aspect of an active participle, in French, rather than a static noun; a difference, significantly, which cannot be heard, only read; so that the term both represents and reenacts a subtle attack on phonocentrism and the metaphysics of presence implicit in all logocentrism.

63 *Differance* refers, according to Gayatri Spivak in the "Translator's Preface" to *Of Grammatology*, to "that which is constituted only through postponement" (xliii).

64 The lesson that 9/11 ought to impress upon us with urgency: that we are always in the middle, never at the beginning or the end. It is a lesson in *rhizomatics*, as imagined by Deleuze and Guattari: "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and … and … and'" (1609). Which is surely the syntax, too, imposed by *differance*. The syntax, finally, of Nietzsche's *eternal return* as read by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, which is the syntax of *affirmation*: "The Negative does not return. The Identical does not return. The Same and the Similar, the Analogous and the Opposed, do not return. Only affirmation returns—in other words, the Different, the Dissimilar" (299; trans. Patton). This is not an affirmation of *identity* but of *difference*: "How could the reader believe," Deleuze asks, "that Nietzsche, who was the greatest critic of these categories, implicated Everything, the Same, the Identical, the Similar, the Equal, the I and the Self in the eternal return? How could it be believed that he understood the eternal return as a cycle, when he opposed 'his' hypothesis to every cyclical hypothesis?" (299). Deleuze is referring here to the proclamation of the dwarf, "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle," and to Zarathustra's response ("And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in

this long dreadful lane—must we not eternally return?") in "On the Vision and the Riddle" in part 3 of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (270; trans. Kaufman).

65 Not Nietzsche's eternal return: not the return, in Deleuze's reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of the Same and the Similar, which is the old logic of representation: "The eternal return eliminates precisely all those instances which strangle difference and prevent its transport by subjecting it to the ... yoke of representation.... The eternal return eliminates that which renders it impossible by rendering impossible the transport of difference. It eliminates the presuppositions of representation, namely the Same and the Similar, the Analogue and the Negative. For representation and its presuppositions return, but only once; they return no more than one time, once and for all, thereafter eliminated for all times" (300). Thus "*the eternal return is indeed the Similar*, *repetition in the eternal return is indeed the Identical—but precisely the resemblance and the identity do not pre-exist the return of that which returns*. They do not in the first instance qualify what returns, they are indistinguishable from its return. *It is not the same which returns*, *it is not the similar which returns*; rather, the Same is the returning of that which returns,—*in other words, of the Different*; the similar is the returning of that which returns,—*in other words, of the Dissimilar*. The repetition in the eternal return is the same, but the same in so far as it is said uniquely of difference and the different. This is a complete reversal of the world of representation, and of the sense that 'identical' and 'similar' had in that world" (300-301). The catastrophic implications of this logic of representation, which is the logic of repetition, are all too visible in the events of 9/11. Deleuze writes, ominously: "Not only does the eternal return not make everything return, it causes those who fail the test to perish ... The Negative does not return. The Identical does not return. The Same and the Similar, the Analogous and the Opposed, do not return. Only affirmation returns—in other words, the Different, the Dissimilar" (299).

66 Destruction as erasure: an act that can only succeed through its failure. As in Derrida's notion of the sign as trace, the erasure is the presence of an absence. "Today," writes Hasan Bülent Kahraman in "Twin Towers: 'Terrible Machine' or the Reality Questioned," "the TT [Twin Towers] is seen through its invisibility" (95). Kahraman refers to this phenomenon as the "*visibility of the invisible*" (95) and links it to the notion of the *horror vacuii* (92). Spike Lee's *25th Hour* was the first major American film to treat the empty space where the Twin Towers used to be. Lee returns again and again to the motif of disappearance: in shots of the devastated New York skyline, and recurrent images of the mop-up operations at ground zero (while Levantine music plays in the background). The Twin Towers, one might argue, are the film's main character(s), haunting it like a ghost, present *in absentia*. On the various ways this absence makes its presence manifest in *25th Hour*, haunting a film in which it appears to have no place, see

Paul Gordon's "After 9/11: *25th Hour*." In *Requiem for the Twin Towers* Baudrillard notes: "although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence" (52).

67 The fall of innocence: a familiar trope that soon became standard in the wake of the disaster, as in the speech delivered by President Bush at the World Congress Center, already cited above: "We are a different country than we were on September the 10th, sadder and less innocent" ("President George W. Bush's Day on November 8, 2001 in Atlanta and Washington").

68 "[A]ny unitary system," Baudrillard argues in *Simulations*, "if it wishes to survive, must acquire a *binary regulation*.... You need two superpowers to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble of itself. And the equilibrium of terror alone can allow a regulated opposition to be established, for the strategy is structural, never atomic" (134; trans. Foss, Patton, and Beitchman). Hence the balance of power during the Cold War: proof, not that America and the Soviet Union were at odds with each other, but that, structurally speaking, they were the same as each other: both necessary poles in a binary system. Later, in *L'esprit du terrorisme* Baudrillard writes: "The allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is, fortunately, universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center embodied perfectly, in their very twinness, this definitive order" ("L'allergie à tout ordre définitif, à toute puissance définitive, est heureusement universelle, et les deux tours du World Trade Center incarnaient parfaitement, dans leur gémellité justement, cet ordre définitif") (12). Only one weapon remains against this definitive order based on the infinite prospect of exchange: the singular act; in other words, the pure gift: "To a system of which the excess of power itself represents an unanswerable provocation, the terrorists respond by a definitive act for which exchange is also impossible. Terrorism is that act which restores an irreducible singularity to the interior of a system of generalized exchange" ("A un système dont l'excès de puissance même pose un défi, insoluble, les terroristes répondent par un acte définitif dont l'échange lui aussi est impossible. Le terrorisme est l'acte qui restitue une singularité irréductible au coeur d'un système d'échange généralisé") (15-16); that is, "To defy the system by a gift to which it cannot respond except with its own death and its own collapse" ("Défier le système par un don auquel il ne peut pas répondre sinon par sa propre mort et son propre effondrement") (25). In this limited sense I would agree with Baudrillard that 9/11 represents a *pure* or *singular* event.

69 *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* was produced by Warhol and assistant Gerard Malanga based on a photograph by John Whitehead which appeared in the 3 June issue of *Newsweek*, and is part of a series of *Car Crashes* (among them five *Burning Cars*, all based on Whitehead's photograph) within the *Death and Disaster* series. (See

Warhol, "Green Car Crash [Green Burning Car]."") Souren Melikian, in an article in the *International Herald Tribune* on the occasion of the auction of *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* suggests that the "uneven repetition" of the work "conveys the impression of a recurring obsession that the viewer in vain seeks to shake off" ("Works by Warhol Bring In $137 Million"). It is as if the events of 9/11 were a form of repetition compulsion, realized in the medium of architecture. The neurotic, prior to his cure, Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (39; trans. Strachey).

70 Adorno's extensive reflections on art after the Holocaust tend to be reduced, as Elaine Martin points out in "Re-reading Adorno: The 'after-Auschwitz' Aporia," to this single sentence, one that tends to be misread. (Susan Gubar's reference, in *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, to "Adorno's injunction against poetry" or the "nihilism of his prohibition against poetry" [240] is typical.) But Adorno is not telling us not to write poetry, only that to do so is barbaric. That postulate does not absolve us of the responsibility to keep trying. Here is the passage from which the infamous sentence is usually stripped: "The more total the society the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its attempt to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" ("Je totaler die Gesellschaft, um so verdinglichter auch der Geist und um so paradoxer sein Beginnen, der Verdinglichung aus Eigenem sich zu entwinden. Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barberei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben") (trans. Martin; cited in "Re-reading Adorno"). As if this weren't clear enough, consider Adorno's own clarification of his "dictum" in the *Negative Dialectics*: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living" (362-63; trans. Ashton).

71 This is, in any case, the uncannily apposite citation Oppenheimer recalls recalling, some twenty years after the event. But was he prepared, even before the event, to recall it after the event? The citation of this citation occurs in the

course of the following reminiscence: "We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that one way or another."

72 For an example of this catastrophic theophany in the classical mode, replace Oppenheimer and the bomb with Semele and Zeus. One will recall the myth, as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 3.257–310: Semele demands to see Zeus in his true, unveiled form; whereupon Semele is destroyed in the conflagration of Zeus's fiery glory: "*He appeared to her* [*domumque intrat*].— */ her mortal form could not endure the shock / and she was burned to ashes in his sight* [*Corpus mortale tumultus / non tulit aetherios donisque iugalibus arsit*]" (305–307; trans. More).

73 The perpetrators of 9/11 may not have been familiar with George Berkeley's *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, but the "success" of their enterprise appears to confirm the idealist proposition which is the foundation of that work: "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi* [their *being* is their *being perceived*], nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds of thinking things which perceive them" (104).

Jonathan Dancy comments in the "Editor's Introduction": "Berkeley thinks it inconceivable that, when you stand before a mountain and consider the way the mountain presents itself to your senses, that thing could exist other than as perceived" (22). "Of course," Dancy adds here in a note, "we want to say that there is more to the mountain than the way it presents itself to us; but Berkeley will reply that that more, whatever it is, is not a sensible thing. He is only talking about the sensible" (22n27). My claim regarding the terrorist act is limited in the same way: I am suggesting there are no specifically terrorist acts without terrorized spectators.

74 Longinus, whose identity has never been established, is the conventional name of the author to whom the *Peri hupsous* is traditionally ascribed; he was probably a Greek rhetorician writing between the first and third centuries AD.

75 Thus Vernon Hyde Minor, in "What Kind of Tears? 9/11 and the Sublime," writes: "The sublime causes astonishment, a state in which everything in one's horror-filled mind remains in suspension. The sublime is not formed by reason, although it may anticipate or produce reason. Stockhausen was in the grip of the sublime when he described the 'greatest work of art for the whole cosmos'; then, too late, his reason returned" (95).

76 See Hasan Bülent Kahraman's discussion of the ruin of the WTC framed as the *terrifying sublime* in his "Twin Towers: 'Terrible Machine' or the Reality Questioned" (91). Anthony Vidler employs that venerable collocation in *Warped Space:*

Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture (55) to characterize Le Corbusier's response to the Parthenon, which he visited twice. Kahraman points out the parallels between Le Corbusier's encounters with the Parthenon in 1911 (*Le Voyage d'Orient* 173) and 1933 (*New World of Space* 66) and Freud's in 1903. For Freud (whose visit to the Parthenon is "confessed," as Kahraman puts it [91n6], in "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis: An Open Letter to Romain Rolland on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday") as for Le Corbusier, the ruin of the Parthenon activates, almost reflexively, a cognition of transcendence (a cognition without content) that corresponds to the category of the sublime. See Richard A. Etlin's *Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier: The Romantic Legacy* (164). To this succession of visits I would add that of Ernest Renan, whose *Prière sur l'Acropole* (from 1876) is a piece of pure idolatry, and which Le Corbusier appears to have read before making his own pilgrimage.

77 "… Tragedy excels by achieving the goal of its mimesis in a shorter scope; greater concentration is more pleasurable"—or, I would add, more horrifying—"than dilution over a long period: suppose someone were to arrange Sophocles' *Oedipus* in as many hexameters as the *Iliad*" (*Poetics* 26, 1462a18–1462b2; trans. Halliwell).

78 "… a *well-timed* [*kairiōs*] flash of sublimity shatters everything *like a bolt of lightning* [*dikēn skēptou*] and reveals the full power of the speaker *at a single stroke* [*athroan*]" (*Sublime* 1.4; trans. Fyfe).

79 "We must begin now by raising the question whether there is an *art* [*tekhnē*] of *sublimity* [*hupsous*] or *emotion* [*pathous*], for some think those are wholly at fault who try to bring such matters under *systematic rules* [*tekhnika paraggelmata*]. *Genius* [*megalophuē*], it is said, *is born* [*gennatai*] and does not come of *teaching* [*didakta*], and the only art for producing it is *nature* [*pephukenai*].… For my part I hold that the opposite may be proved, if we consider that while in matters of elevation and emotion *Nature* [*phusis*] for the most part knows no *law* [*autonomon*], yet it is not the way of Nature to work at random and wholly *without system* [*amethodon*]" (*On the Sublime* 2.1-2).

80 We return to Virilio's concept of the *integral accident* (*The Accident of Art* 99–100) as the dominating principle in Attic tragedy. For there are no *local accidents* in tragedy; which is as much as to say there are no accidents *per se*. Writing on the apparent suspicion of metanarratives in the *postmodern* era, Lyotard asserts in *The Postmodern Condition*: "Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism" (xxiv). Representations of and responses to catastrophes such as 9/11 suggests that the society of the future will be much like the society of the past, and that what begins as local determinism inevitably turns into a general determinism

of systematic or structural order, a determinism we could properly term *tragic*.

81 "So it is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions" (6, 1450a19–21; trans. Halliwell); "Plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, soul of tragedy, while character is secondary" (6, 1450b1-2).

82 This individualizing impulse runs contrary to Aristotle's notion of the ideal tragic plot, which is "not unified, as some think, if built around an individual" (8, 1451a16–17: trans. Halliwell).

83 In a valedictory piece on the last day of the series, Janny Scott cites novelist Paul Auster: in reading these brief biographical sketches, Auster affirms, "We weren't mourning an anonymous mass of people, we were mourning thousands of individuals. And the more we knew about them, the more we could wrestle with our own grief" ("Closing a Scrapbook Full of Life and Sorrow").

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

85 Indeed it was precisely as a trope, or a symbol, that Osama bin Laden needed to be destroyed. One cannot help but remark, in the various communiqués that reported his death on 1 May 2011, the tension between bin Laden viewed as potent symbol and as inert body. "For over two decades," we are reminded in Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, and Mark Mazzetti's "Bin Laden is Dead, Obama Says," the *New York Times* article that appeared immediately upon the news of his death, "Bin Laden has been Al Qaeda's leader and symbol"; his demise is merely "a symbolic stroke"; and, indeed, "for years … American leaders have said he was more symbolically important than operationally significant." But in the same article we are informed, "American military and C.I.A. operatives had finally cornered Bin Laden … who had eluded them for nearly a decade. American officials said Bin Laden resisted and was shot in the head. He was later buried at sea." The fate of Osama bin Laden suggests that death can be defined as the passage from symbol to substance, from abstraction to particularity. The decision to bury bin Laden at sea is also instructive. The same article from the *New York Times* informs us that "Muslim tradition requires burial within 24 hours, but by doing it at sea, American authorities presumably were trying to avoid creating a shrine for his followers." But we may also say they were trying to prevent the reconversion of a body into a symbol.

86 It would be more precise to say that tragedies begin, as Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* would have us begin, *in medias res*, *in the middle of things* (1609; trans. Massumi). Tragedies, in formal terms, turn such middles into beginnings.

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