

# 9/11: The Interpretation of Disaster as Disaster of Interpretation—An American Catastrophe Reflected in American and European Discourses

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## PRELIMINARIES

The killing of Osama bin Laden almost exactly ten years after the attack on the Twin Towers was viewed by the US government as an important step in the War on Terror. For others, it was an occasion for melancholy musings. One commentary spoke of “ten lost years” for politics and political discourse, and, for many, the intentional killing appeared to be confirmation that Western society has lost its moral compass as a result of this war.<sup>1</sup>

The simultaneously emphatic and irritatingly different comments concerning the terrorist attacks on 9/11 that dominated both the public

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Minkmar, “Die Welt nach 9/11. Ein verlorenes Jahrzehnt”.

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and the scholarly discourses, confirm this assessment. At the same time as the central themes of the predominantly political discourses were being mobilized, the incompatibility of theoretically grounded understandings of the world, on the one hand, and immediate experience, on the other, became apparent, just like the difficulties in the transferral of theoretical discourse into political discourse and vice versa. In the end, nothing was certain any longer—the multiplicity of interpretations and evaluations revealed a severe lack of orientation among the Western intelligentsia, who nonetheless were reluctant to give up their claim to provide definitive interpretations. The disaster of the terrorist attack led to a disaster of interpretation among the scientific community and social intellectuals. This change in the discourse that was brought about by 9/11 looks like a satirical sideshow that accompanied the breakdown of solidarity between the US and the countries that Donald Rumsfeld, using a phrase taken from Karl Marx, referred to as “Old Europe.” Indeed, it became apparent that the opposing opinions about the conflict were not only based on differences between the European and US-American evaluation of terrorism, but primarily on diverging interpretations in the European founding countries and in the new, mainly Eastern European states. The specific social and historical experiences in these countries prevailed over the demand for an overall European solidarity, thus 9/11 also became a challenge for the European idea as such. In addition to the differing political comments, there were also from the very outset ideas inspired by media theory and the aesthetics of media that ran in an entirely different direction. It can be observed that at the same time a specifically European discourse gains importance. All these approaches emphasized the autonomy of the way the media work against the facticity of the event and thereby offended public opinion, which was dominated by stereotypical forms of argumentation and strategies for expressing outrage.

Artists were the first provocateurs, but the public excitement that they consciously provoked quickly subsided. When German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen characterized the events of 9/11 immediately afterwards as the “größte Kunstwerk, das auf der Welt existiert” [the greatest work of art that exists anywhere in the entire cosmos],<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Karlheinz Stockhausen made this statement at a press conference on September 16, 2001, which then made the national news, as cited in Collenberg, “‘Vorstellung des Terrors’—9/11, RAF, and the Sublime”.

there was still a great deal of disapproval since Germany had just promised the United States not only their sympathy, but even their support. Ten years and many commentaries and images later, Anselm Kiefer, who belongs to the group of contemporary German artists of international standing—like Gerhard Richter, whose creative engagement with 9/11 is explored in this volume—compared the events of September 11 in the Collège de France to the “strong and simple beauty” of Genet’s poetry and stated that Osama bin Laden had thereby “created the most perfect images that we have seen since we saw the steps of the first man on the moon.” His thesis that bin Laden was not interested in a terrorist act, but above all in the production of symbolically powerful images was greeted by the audience composed of the educated bourgeoisie in France with only polite applause.<sup>3</sup> Maybe it reminded them of Marcel Proust’s descriptions of the First World War in the text of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which present the German bombing of Paris<sup>4</sup> as an aesthetic event comparable to Ernst Jünger’s aesthetic celebration of a bombing attack on Paris in the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the French author’s text corresponds to the view of the German author, who wrote one of the most famous German narratives about the First World War, namely, the text *In Stahlgewittern*, which is an authentic war diary rewritten several times. Nevertheless, this French indifference is astounding. It is undoubtedly connected not only to a specific national perspective, but also to ideas from media theory that in this particular case were at work in the public discourse and in the meantime have become popular. From the very outset, this act of terror was also perceived from the perspective of a staged media event. This shows how difficult it has become for a society dominated by the media to separate factual events from their presentation in the media.

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Bopp, “Anselm Kiefer am Collège de France. Bin Laden—eine Kunst-Performance?”.

<sup>4</sup>Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 380: “[...] des feux intermittents que, soit de ces aéroplanes, soit de projecteurs de la Tour Eiffel, on savait dirigés par une volonté intelligente [...]”.

<sup>5</sup>Jünger, *Tagebücher III: Strahlungen II*, 271.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

George W. Bush's statement that, "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail,"<sup>6</sup> is paralleled by Barack Obama's similarly pathos-filled announcement of bin Laden's death. He did not say anything about an intentional killing nor did he ever provide any details about the circumstances of this death. His comments were rather, "So his demise should be welcomed by all who believe in peace and human dignity" and when he added that "justice has been done," his position was not fundamentally different from Bush's, for whom the "justice" that he swore to pursue had nothing to do with a state committed to the rule of law. Nor has the new president, in the view of many European intellectuals, generally distanced himself from his predecessor's position. Severely disappointed, they criticize him that he has taken it upon himself to continue to pursue the American war against evil in Afghanistan and to continue to deny the prisoners at Guantánamo access to normal legal procedures and trials.

Many European intellectuals attributed Bush's statements to the limited world view of an evangelical fundamentalist at the same time as they expressed an understanding for the resistance of the deposed Sunnis in Iraq and the Afghan Taliban. The German assessment of the US pursuit of the war has been especially strongly characterized by a conspicuously limited recognition of its complexity devoid of any sober political analysis. It is ironic that the German defenders of morality thereby resemble not only the American Neo-cons but also the propagators of radical Islam in the way that they simply invert Bush's schema of good and evil and couch it in the religious Manichean vocabulary of a "holy war" undertaken by "God's warriors" that has been uncritically adopted by the Western media.

The development within the European discourse has been astounding because the stance of the European opponents to the war had very different motivations. This is especially true about the differences between Germany and France, whose politics were based not on comparable moral principles but upon different economic and geopolitical interests and attempts to stake out their particular spheres of influence. At the same time, the Europeans in the purported self-certainty of

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<sup>6</sup>George W. Bush in a White House press release of 12 November 2001, quoted in Virilio, *Ground Zero*, 36.

their judgments ignored their own historical responsibilities. It was not American, but rather European colonial politics that had established the current borders in the Middle East, including the state of Israel. Already during the First World War the colonial powers, England and France, had outlined their spheres of influence in the Middle East after the expected defeat of the Ottoman Empire with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The borders resulting from the following Peace Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 ignored ethnic and religious differences within these regions and gave rise to states such as Syria, Libya or Iraq. These states are currently on the brink of becoming failed states. Also as early as 1917, Britain had determined, with the Balfour Declaration, the borders of the state of Israel in its mandated territory of Palestine.

It is worth noting that the intervention by several NATO countries in Libya was legitimized with the same arguments that one did not want to accept from the Americans for their pursuit of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It is not without irony that in the course of the first "Arabellion," France celebrates itself for its military support of democracy in its former sphere of influence—the same France whose Foreign Legion is constantly and without any parliamentary control active in several crisis regions in Africa. There are numerous other contradictions along these lines that could be cited, but I hope these brief references will suffice to illustrate my point.

### THE DISCURSIVE EVENT

The context for these complex affairs involving political power is one of the reasons for the discursive event that the terrorist attacks generate. The unfolding of this discourse led to a polarization of the political fronts and an oversimplification of complex political and historical issues. Both the Islamists and the Americans could each characterize the other as the enemy, which lent support to reactionary forces on both sides.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the attack on New York was compared to Pearl Harbor or to the Algerian resistance against France, in each case, leading to very different conclusions, illustrates how historical coordinates were intentionally neglected, something which is also demonstrated in numerous

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*.

novels. Moreover, the Europeans regarded themselves as referees in a conflict in which they saw themselves neither involved nor threatened.

It seems as if the terrorists who attacked New York had planned precisely this discursive collateral damage, a result that had been prepared theoretically and psychologically by discussions in European and to a lesser extent in American universities and among public intellectuals. This is one of the primary reasons why the conflict became the subject of an interpretation that was directed to the genesis of the terror and attributed it to social injustices, American power interests, and global economic cartels. The moral discourse which originated from the German responsibility for the Holocaust and had dominated Germany prior to the *Wende* in 1989, but had been delegitimized by the complexity of the processes involved in the reunification of completely different political and social value-orders, was now revived.

In intellectual circles within American universities, by contrast, the main arguments offered in “postcolonial studies,” which was also undergoing a crisis over its legitimacy, were reanimated, even though the Islamists themselves had shown that they completely rejected a hybrid fusing of cultures. Baudrillard vehemently criticized this interpretation as advanced, for example, by Arundhati Roy, author of the Booker-prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and political activist, who saw the attackers as victims. For Baudrillard, a “thesis that takes hopelessness as its point of departure, is itself hopeless” or an unwitting accomplice of the system.<sup>8</sup>

One assessment that at least at first glance appears much more differentiated and is also concretely political came from Noam Chomsky. He does not assign blame to any one group, but traced the New York attack back to the bitterness and anger that many people feel over American politics in the Arab region.<sup>9</sup> Chomsky’s judgment was directed at the specific political actions of the US, undoubtedly among them America’s acceptance of the Israeli settlement policies in the “West Bank,” which was occupied by Israel during the “Six Days War” in 1967. His criticism is consistent with the basic idea also shared by many European public

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<sup>8</sup>Jean Baudrillard in *Le Monde*, November 3, 2001, and reprinted in Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, 77.

<sup>9</sup>Noam Chomsky in a 2001 interview, Chomsky, *The Attack: Hintergründe und Folgen*, 18.

figures that, in principle, all political and cultural differences can be solved by consensus.<sup>10</sup> However, Chomsky does not face up to the inner dialectic of enlightened reason that guides this model of thinking, which simultaneously defines the preconditions of a “just war.”

Paul Auster’s view that the new cultural confrontation that is becoming apparent in the form of an asymmetric war as a sign for the beginning of the twenty-first century, can be instructive here. For Auster, the historical date did not mark off a temporal era.<sup>11</sup> Rather it metaphorically characterized the new global world order that is distinguished not only by the simultaneity of different temporal orders, but also as a fundamental asymmetry of experiential worlds. Both give rise not just to violent conflict but also at the same time to antagonistic explanatory models.

The increasing awareness of this new situation no longer came about just in terms of a rational discourse, but was rather mediated above all through the medium of images.<sup>12</sup> Neither the neoconservative acceptance of a “clash of cultures,” i.e., a conflict between progress and reactionary forces in the field of politics, nor the postcolonial interpretation in terms of military and terroristic conflicts, takes sufficient account of the way these political oppositions and their consequences are presented through the media. That is why old models of discourse that were no longer adequate for this new conflict and the current historical situation continued to be employed.

In the confrontation between the West and the Islamic world, the morally grounded acceptance of alterity was seen as the necessary answer to the blameworthiness of the European colonial powers and Germany’s historical blameworthiness for fascism. What the Germans forgot in the discussion is above all the fact that the change in their own attitude towards the war in the Balkans and the change in the leading political discourse had been brought about through manipulation of the way these events were portrayed in the media. Faced with the pictures of the Serbian camps broadcast on television, the Foreign Secretary replaced

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Habermas and Derrida, *Philosophie in Zeiten des Terrors. Zwei Gespräche, geführt, eingeleitet und kommentiert von Giovanna Borradori*.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Auster, “Jetzt beginnt das 21. Jahrhundert. Wir alle wussten, dass dies geschehen könnte. Nun ist es viel schlimmer.” Cf. also Schami, *Mit fremden Augen. Tagebuch über den 11. September, den Palästina-Konflikt und die arabische Welt*, 17.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. the general tenor of the volume edited by Butter, Christ, and Keller, *9/11. Kein Tag, der die Welt veränderte*, 6–12 and 15–46.

the previously dominant motto in Germany “Never again war” with “Never again concentration camps.”

Accordingly, the German, the European, and the American discussion of 9/11 all make use of an arsenal of metaphorical formulae that, in the interplay of images and public discourse, unfolded in contradictory ways. What was not considered is the fact that in the course of the loss of legitimacy of the “grands récits,” that was decoded by François Lyotard, this arsenal of formulae had already long since lost its original basis. Baudrillard recognizes in the resulting “neutralization of values” at the same time a loss of legitimacy of reality itself through the media.<sup>13</sup> He could have added that this “neutralization of values” also leads to the loss of legitimacy for the public intellectuals’ discourse as well. Even the political discourse is interspersed with lacunae in understanding. They are now replaced by the new power of images. But just those images which seem to promise unambiguity open up opportunities for manipulations on an entirely new scale.

The triumph of images has long been the topic of analyses in media history. Representatives of critical theory and Vilém Flusser, among others, have pointed to the political consequences of this development.<sup>14</sup> It has become apparent that the media not only facilitate an awareness “that people no longer (really) talk to each other, and that ‘spectacles’ and the so-called hyperreality of the media come to substitute for genuine social activity,”<sup>15</sup> and thereby this leads to deformations in the laws by which the social systems operate.<sup>16</sup> Images do not merely replace discursive formations; they become goods—they achieve their effect by their exchange values, not by adequately reproducing actual states of affairs.

This becomes particularly significant with regard to intercultural communication, in which alterity itself becomes a media construct. Arjun Appadurai emphasizes how, in a global community that is subject to the law of “modernity at large,” genuine traditional political, moral, and cultural orders dissolve. They are replaced by images that now produce

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” 51.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Debord, *La société du Spectacle*, 7.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Luhmann (ed.), *Ökologische Kommunikation: Kann die Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen?* 269.

mere imaginary communicative communities and imaginary worlds. The epochal signature of a simultaneity of what is not simultaneous corresponds to the simultaneity of imagination and relation to reality that is communicated by the media. The media do not therefore lead to a new experience of reality or to a correction of inappropriate assessments. Rather they make it possible for different groups that live in a global diaspora to tailor everything to their own imaginations. For Appadurai, imagination itself becomes a “social fact and a primary component of the new global order.” Under the influence of the media, what emerges are “ethnoscapes,” “mediascapes,” and “ideoscapes.” These are constructions of virtual identity, which are based on ethnic or self-identifying stereotypes transmitted by mass media. They provide the new patterns for orientation that refer to the original orientations but vary and transform them in fundamental ways.

### MEDIATED STAGING AND MEDIA PRESENTATIONS OF TERROR

Shortly after the events of 9/11, Jean Baudrillard told *Le Monde* that, out of all of the different weapons that the terrorists took from the system that they were attacking, the most useful had been the authenticity of the pictures and their immediate world-wide transmission.<sup>17</sup> He shares German philosopher’s Jürgen Habermas’ view that the meaning of September 11 resulted not from the event itself, but rather from the particular form of its communicative mediation.<sup>18</sup> Both of them agree that the audience’s view that is communicated through the media produces a different view compared to the view produced by immediate experience.<sup>19</sup>

Jacques Derrida added a semiotic note to these ideas from media and communication theory. In the temporal formula “September 11,” he decodes a language without referential function. It conjures up and names something that cannot be adequately expressed linguistically.<sup>20</sup> The merely deictic naming points to the traumatic effects of an event for

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jean Baudrillard in *Le Monde*, November 3, 2001, quoting in accordance with the English translation in Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” 27.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Borradori, “Die Rekonstruktion des Terrorismusbegriffs nach Habermas,” 75.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 52f.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 368.

which there is no “horizon of anticipation, knowledge, naming,” that would allow for its “identification, determination, and interpretation.”<sup>21</sup>

In an earlier essay, Baudrillard had insisted that only death can escape the social laws of exchange that he decodes and identifies as the basic form of contemporary society. Corresponding to this way of thinking, he also constructs a theory of the media from the perspective of his theory of the *simulacrum*.<sup>22</sup> He characterizes the attack on the Twin Towers as an “absolute event” that cannot be captured by any historical classification simply because it is comparable to the infinite cinematic fictions and therefore to events that have never actually happened.<sup>23</sup> Only through the association with the fictional and the imaginary can the real terror attack unfold the symbolic power that is the basis for its actual effect.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the images, metaphors, and collective memories that were set loose in this interaction developed a unique dynamic of their own in the journalistic and intellectual discourses that are responsible for what I earlier called the “disaster of interpretation,” the failure to be able to come to any final and rational judgments about these events.<sup>25</sup>

In a manner similar to Slavoj Žižek, Baudrillard connects this symbolic effect of the event with unconscious processes. In his view, the terrorist act just realizes “that terrorist imagination that dwells in all of us,”<sup>26</sup> and its effect is based on a “deep, unconscious complicity,”<sup>27</sup> because its final meaning results in the end from the fact that the terrorists in their strategy precisely calculated that they could count on this complicity that cannot ever be acknowledged.<sup>28</sup> “The catastrophe film of Manhattan” unites “the white light of an image” and the “black light of

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1–43 and 87–95.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Baudrillard, “Der Geist des Terrorismus,” 42.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. Schmitt, “Die weiße Magie des Kinos und die schwarze Magie des Terrorismus. Gedanken zum 11. September 2001,” indication of Waitz, “Die Frage der Bilder. 9/11 als filmisch Abwesendes,” 228.

terrorism,”<sup>29</sup> but in the end what alone dominates is the “view of the images” that for Baudrillard represent nothing other than “our primordial scene (*Urszene*).”<sup>30</sup> The event of terror thereby also shatters society’s character as a system of exchanges.<sup>31</sup>

Baudrillard’s and Žižek’s psychological interpretation, along with Derrida’s semiotic argument, can all be traced back to an idea from Kant. An event, Kant concludes, with regard to the perception of the French Revolution in Germany, becomes a “historical sign” above all through the way that it is perceived by the public. It then displays, in addition to its referential power as a “*signum demonstrativum*,” a twofold temporality: as a “*signum demonstrativum*,” it recalls the past, as a “*signum prognosticon*,” it simultaneously points to the future.<sup>32</sup> One explanation for the different contextualizations of the same images that are presented over and over by the media could be that the Europeans, Americans, and Islamists in their “*enthusiastischen*” (“enthusiastic”)<sup>33</sup> perceptions each stress a different temporal structure of the events that are experienced as “historical signs.” If that is true, then the differences among the discursive appropriations that are associated with them result from a metonymy of the meanings that are only purportedly intercultural.

### TRUTH AND LIES IN IMAGES AND TEXTS

Almost every inhabitant of the global public sphere witnessed the events without being there themselves.<sup>34</sup> The transmission of the images, almost in real time, suggested the authenticity of a documentary. However, the images were by no means reliable. The still photos distributed on the internet competed with the blurred pictures taken by smart-phones that claimed to be authentic, but as a rule declined to provide decoded details. These were accompanied by film sequences that showed a series of events that were repeated in endless loops. This overlay of

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<sup>29</sup>Baudrillard, “Der Geist des Terrorismus,” 75.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>32</sup>Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 357. I would like to thank Kaspar Renner for pointing this out.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 357.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Deupmann, “Ausnahmestand des Erzählens. Zeit und Ereignis in Ulrich Peltzers Erzählung *Bryant Park* und anderen Texten über den 11. September 2001,” 17.

different image formats blurred the difference between analytical and empathic reactions in a fundamental way.

In spite of their authenticity as cool media, which, according to Marshall McLuhan's media theory, are more open and less clearly defined than writing, all of the images turned out to have limited effective power.<sup>35</sup> They only became "historical signs" once they were presented in various cultural codes. These codes were oriented, on the one hand, to the images of catastrophes that were already present in the European cultural memory, such as the images of Napoleon's Battle of Berezina on the retreat from Moscow, the German defeat of Stalingrad in the Second World War, or the motif of the shipwreck in Greek or Roman literature.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, these codes gain autonomy as images, which structure the predominant political, cultural, and aesthetic discourses and which are nearly all presented by means of the mass media. This interplay of actual and cultural transmissions of the images also influences the conception of the reconstruction of the Ground Zero site.<sup>37</sup> Whereas the terrorist act itself can be comprehended as the culmination point of structure developments,<sup>38</sup> its very character as an event consisted in its transmission through the media and the reactions that followed. This also holds for the self-portrayals of the combatants that were instrumentalized in the war of images that was waged on the internet. Bin Laden presented himself as Jesus or a prophet; Hillary Clinton, by contrast, was reduced to a typically American gesture of horror by a manipulation of the images as she witnessed him being killed. In the first picture of the presidential war room we see Hillary Clinton together with Barack Obama and several military personnel watching the live

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<sup>35</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ulrich Kinzel's chapter "The Wind of the Hudson. Gerhard Richter's *September* (2005) and the European Perception of Catastrophe" in this volume.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Kolter, "Architecture Ciente: Nine Eleven zwischen Katastrophenästhetik, biblischem Strafgericht und Dekonstruktivismus," 349; cf. Reudenbach, G. B. *Piranesi. Architektur als Bild. Der Wandel der Architekturauffassung des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 358.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Lethen, "Bildarchiv und Traumaphilie. Schrecksekunden der Kulturwissenschaften nach dem 11.9.2001," 3. Niels Werber comes to a similar conclusion with regard to German 'pop literature,' cf. "Der Teppich des Sterbens. Gewalt und Terror in der neuesten Popliteratur." Cf. Mergenthaler, "'Weiter schreiben' nach dem 11. September—Barbara Bongartz, Alban Nikolai Herbsts und Norbert Wehrs 'Inzest oder Die Entstehung der Welt'," 40.

images of the special forces attack, in the second picture, only Clinton can be seen as an observer while only the opened laptops on the table remind us of the digitally deleted persons.

For the 9/11 attack itself, it makes sense to analyse three images with which a visual connection between the factual event and images of cultural memory can be established. These images have served as models not only for the public perceptions, but also for literary and scholarly descriptions. They can also be read as abbreviations for perceptual states.

### *Ruins of Progress*

Baudrillard's thesis that the architecture of the Twin Towers was a symbolic construction explains not only why they became targets for the terrorists, it can also serve as a model for the public as well as the scholarly discourse. At first the current perceptions were related to the cultural memory of images.<sup>39</sup> The steel skeletons of the collapsed towers to which Art Spiegelman's comic strip directly refers, seemed to make reference to Romantic images, whose broken-down monumental ruins with their columns and thresholds recall the architectural plans on which they were based. This overlay of signs of construction and destruction has become a metaphor for the beginning and the failures of the modern world ever since the Romantic-Surreal architectural etchings by the Italian artist Giovanni Battista. They also remind us of the Tower of Babel that has become part of the stereotypical canon of European painting and that, as the background scene to Vienna in the masterpiece of cinematic expressionism *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) [The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari] has served as the signature of modernity, which is associated with the eruption of that which is alien and impossible to rationalize.<sup>40</sup> It is thus also not surprising how many literary accounts of 9/11 use the Biblical motif.

In the public discourse, by contrast, these pictorial cultural recollections are actualized and recoded. The besieged towers no longer appear as the representation of mutual understanding in a globalized economy,

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<sup>39</sup>Cf. Kolter, "Architecture Ciente," 349–351.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel* (1565), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



**Fig. 1** Thomas Hoepker: *Young People on the Brooklyn Waterfront on Sept. 11*

on the one hand, and American claims to domination, on the other.<sup>41</sup> The cultural critiques in Europe view the attacks above all as directed towards the United States as the epicenter of globalization and secularization, and thereby bestowed special significance on the event that served as confirmation of greatness in its decline.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting that it is precisely in literary studies that one can see the fatal consequences of the internal dynamics of the metaphors that were unleashed by these images. From the perspective of one feminist scholar, the images of the catastrophe are read against the backdrop of “iconographically assured allegorization” that are supposed to let us see the World Trade Center either as a double phallus or as the female body, symbolizing the modern metropolis as it is being penetrated by the

<sup>41</sup> Cf. basically Bongartz and Herbst, “*Inzest oder Die Entstehung der Welt. Der Anfang eines Romanes in Briefen*”.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Virilio, *Guerre et cinéma*, 101.

phallic airliners.<sup>43</sup> In a literary discussion between the German writers Barbara Bongartz and Alban Nikolai Herbst, the image of the attack on the Twin Towers is therefore set in parallel to Courbet's picture of *The Origin of the World*.<sup>44</sup> This is a rather embarrassingly awkward paraphrase of Jünger's above-mentioned description of the bombing of Paris as a poetic begetting scene, which for his modern readers shows that all sense of reality has disappeared in the face of scholarship and literature.<sup>45</sup>

### *Shipwreck With the Audience*

Against the background of the catastrophe, Thomas Hoepker's *Young People on the Brooklyn Waterfront on Sept. 11* (Fig. 1), shows a scene with people who are watching the event. By making the observation itself the theme and the observers into the figures who set the perspective, the image can be related to a central configuration of historical memory. In antiquity, it is the "shipwreck with an audience" who take on the perils of sea travel that can lead to catastrophe that is contrasted with the self-contained limitations of those who stay behind on land.<sup>46</sup> In Romanticism, this is the perspective of those who gaze upon the sublime, that which cannot be grasped by mere understanding, who are both attracted and abhorred by what they see.<sup>47</sup> Modernity, by contrast, creates an observer which Ernst Jünger called a "cool persona," who in the face of horror transforms the experience of terror into an aesthetic image.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Cf. Elisabeth Bronfen, quoting Klaus Theweleit, *Der Knall: 11. September, das Verschwinden der Realität und ein Kriegsmodell*, 142.

<sup>44</sup>Bongartz and Herbst, "Inzest oder Die Entstehung der Welt," 59f. Cf. Savatier, *L'origine du monde. Histoire d'un tableau de Gustave Courbet*.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Mergenthaler, "Weiter schreiben' nach dem 11. September," 45; Mergenthaler refers here to the interpretation of Courbet by Metken, cf. *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>46</sup>For the thematic history, cf. Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer—Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*.

<sup>47</sup>Heinrich von Kleist, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, "Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft," 327f.

<sup>48</sup>After a round undertaken through the historical experience, Ernst Jünger points out that "dieses Zweite und kältere Bewußtsein" [this second and colder consciousness, my translation] of the technically controlled perception replaces the pain, which alone is competent to enable the humans to support the world of nihilism. Jünger, "Über den Schmerz," 181f.

None of this is determined by the image alone. First of all, this is merely a paraphrase of the classic metaphor of a shipwreck. The observer, who is watching from somewhere in Brooklyn that seems to stand outside the laws of globalization, is watching the downfall of the capitalistic enterprise in Manhattan. Moreover, the modern observer demonstrates an almost monstrous indifference to what he sees. The actually perceived catastrophe appears far away, reduced to a mere image that is consumed in just the same way as the images of the catastrophe that are transmitted through various media and can immediately be posted. At the same time, however, the construction of the image also reveals a contradiction that refutes the purported security of viewing from a distance. It thereby reproduces the irritation that the Romantic images once produced, but in a different way. For, in the construction of the image, the viewer as an observer becomes himself the object who can be viewed by others. Without knowing it, the observers are subject to the colonizing gaze that a media society allows everybody, and with which it, at the same time, robs all of them of their unique and distinct experiences.

### THE FALLING MAN

This picture sheds light not only on the event but also on the laws of a media society itself that is fixated on images.<sup>49</sup> It was surprising here that the attempts to identify the man who was falling in order to be able to decode this image as an authentic document were intentionally stopped. (The Photograph “The Falling Man” by Richard Drew See Fig. 2 on P. 000). For this very reason, it can be related to the cultural encodings such as medieval court scenes, the Tarot in Marseille, or the pictures from Sandro Chia that all aim to subvert the normal view through the inversion of natural bodies.<sup>50</sup> This picture of the falling man also turns a documentation into a subversion. For it is the result of a selection, one of twelve pictures that were taken as a series. The selection of this image follows a strategy of aesthetization that presupposes the cold view of a Jüngerian *désinvolture*. This is the only picture in which the limbs of the falling body are parallel to the architecture

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<sup>49</sup>For the detailed history of the painting and his references, cf. Martin Raspe, “The Falling Man. Der 11. September in der Momentaufnahme,” in Irsigler and Jürgensen, *Nine Eleven. Ästhetische Bearbeitungen des 11. Septembers 2001*, 369.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 380.

lines of the building, it is the only one in which the movement downward seems to be captured effortlessly in the snap moment of the photograph. This opens up a parallel to Antonioni's demonstrations of the interaction between photograph and film in *Blow Up*.<sup>51</sup> In that film, the different medial conditionings of visual perception are paradigmatically exemplified by a murder case. It argues that a single photograph that is selected from a series of photos can show a decisive moment and a detail more precisely than a cinematic sequence of images. In this respect Antonioni's film can be related to Roland Barthes' theory of photography presented in *La Chambre claire*. It distinguishes between "*studium*"—the documentary character of the photograph—and "*punctum*"—the special meaning which can be opened up for the beholder by a special detail in the image. The cinematic presentation in Antonioni's case and in this picture by Drew evokes the perception of detail by means of a merely suggestive staging of the horror.<sup>52</sup> The *punctum* in this picture opens up a further perspective because the aesthetic presentation based on a selection can also be plausibly compared to the purportedly authentic picture of the "Falling Soldier" from the Spanish Civil War, that in the meantime has been unmasked as a fake produced by the US-Hungarian war photographer Robert Capa.<sup>53</sup>

In the tension between documentation and aesthetic production, the image of *The Falling Man* documents a two-fold reduction of the human subject. As the target of a terrorist attack, humans are the objects of a strategy of destruction and elimination as a body without any regard to the specific person. As the object of an aesthetic selection, the falling man is also reduced to a mere body that only through its transformation takes on meaning as an aesthetic sign.

The philosophical conception of "*homo sacer*" by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, which plays a central role in social systems and is systematically reduced by violence and terror to its mere corporality (as further explored in Philipp Hubmann's analysis of the literary representation of Guantánamo in chapter [Tourist/Terrorist: Narrating Uncertainty in Early European Literature](#) in this volume),<sup>54</sup> thereby

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Renner, "Das Auge der Erinnerung. Fotografie in Texten der klassischen Moderne und im Film von Michelangelo Antonioni," 198–211.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, 86, 102 and Sontag, *Über Fotografie*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Raspe, "The Falling Man. Der 11. September in der Momentaufnahme," 369.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Die souveräne Macht und das nackte Leben*.

takes on a new meaning that translates a basic tendency from the history of totalitarianism into a basic formula for the age of media. The falling man is not only rendered a mere object through the actual terrorist violence that he suffers, but also through the aesthetic manipulations of the media to which he is subjected even after his life is over.

This pattern is reproduced and transformed for a number of reasons in literature as well. First of all, language must try to defend its status against the images that are transmitted by the media and thereby precede it. It is also the case that the narrative finds itself in a state of emergency<sup>55</sup> because it is confronted with a horror that reveals the limits of ordinary language up until now, as the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and the author Jean Améry noted in the face of the very different catastrophe of the Holocaust.<sup>56</sup>

Most of the literary accounts from eye-witnesses<sup>57</sup> attempted to reconstruct the suddenness of the event, or, if they were not able to be direct participants in it,<sup>58</sup> to make up for this deficit through various narrative devices. It turned out to be very difficult to establish direct participation as a sufficient basis for the reliability of the narrator.<sup>59</sup> In closing, I would like to point to two texts that successfully overcame this problem.

In the novel *Bryant Park* (2002) by German writer Ulrich Peltzer, the event of 9/11 itself is interjected almost marginally into three different narrative levels, that are embedded within each other and upon which constantly changing images from different contexts are overlain. The result is a high-visible density that connects the settings where the actions take place, namely, Berlin, New York, and Italy to each other in

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<sup>55</sup>Cf. Deupmann, "Ausnahmestand des Erzählens," 19.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Améry, "An den Grenzen des Geistes".

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; cf. Röggl, *really ground zero. 11. september und folgendes*.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Deupmann, "Ausnahmestand des Erzählens," 19.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Derrida, *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen*, 60. In contrast to this, cf. Buschheuer, *Das New York Tagebuch*, 160 (Diary entry of 12 September 2001, 1:25 New York time): "Ich war zu weit weg zum Sterben, zu nah zum Weiterleben. So fühlt sich das an. Drei Kilometer; gestern hat sich mir das Herz zusammengekrampft, wie nah es doch war, als ich abends zur Unglückstelle ging. Wie knapp." [I was too far away to die, too close, to live. That is how it feels like. Three kilometres; yesterday my heart cramped, how close it was after all, when I went to the destruction site. How close. My translation].

a manner that recalls cinematic superimpositions. The story thereby produces a simultaneity of different temporal levels with very different catastrophes because the transition from one to another level of events often takes place in the same sentence. This narrative continuity is conspicuously interrupted by the event of the terrorist attack. At first, the suddenness of the event and the reaction to it are conveyed only through the media—through film images, telephone calls, and emails.<sup>60</sup> The event itself, however, neither significantly changes the flow of the narrative nor does it disrupt the narrative order through its suddenness. Rather the uniqueness of the event is controlled by its “own unique time” (*Eigenzeit*) of the narration and is finally made to disappear. Against the violence of the actual attack, the self-empowerment of the subject asserts itself in the unmistakable language of its own narration, so that in the end language triumphs over the images. At the same time, the act of narration becomes a psychological self-empowerment that corrects the decentralization produced by the media. In the own unique time of the narration, the narrating itself constitutes itself as noticeably untouched.

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, by contrast, is determined in every section of the narrative by the event of the terror attacks. All of the different family and relationship histories begin with it and all of them lead up to it. The text thereby develops a temporal structure of its own that comes about in the interaction between stretching out and accelerating the series of events that are described in visually vivid ways. The text thus constantly reproduces the selection within a series of photographs, just as the photographer Drew does with his *Falling Man*. One of the central passages in the text makes a reference to this image and connects it with the story of one of the protagonists.<sup>61</sup> This also occurs across several temporal levels. The fall of the *Falling Man* is perceived during the attempt to escape the North Tower repeatedly and with different levels of accuracy.<sup>62</sup>

This also corresponds to the central motif in the text, namely, the repeated enactments of a falling man presented by a performance artist who simulates a suicide, a fall onto the train tracks or a street over and over, whereby each time he is rescued at the last second by a rope from

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<sup>60</sup>Cf. Peltzer, *Bryant Park*, 134–145.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 253.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 284.

which he ends up hanging upside down. This reduction of the event to a sign is placed in ever new contexts by the audience in different situations and at different moments. This results in an “own unique time” of perception. The fall that is reduced to a mere sign reveals different strategies for coping and creates new forms of interaction with the memory of the authentic events. This is what the phrase “She was the photograph” refers to in the passage where a woman relates the performance of *Falling Man* to a suicide which she now recalls again.<sup>63</sup>

The opposite holds as well, the simulated fall decontextualizes and subverts everyday orders as well, that which is otherwise taken for granted, the context in which the audience is involved. This includes the fact that it leads to unconscious reactions that the audience cannot control, and it becomes clear that many of the horrified spectators are not just expecting, but even hoping for a real calamity.<sup>64</sup> The text illustrates in multiple ways the idea from media theory that the terror attack only achieves its full effect through the audience, the way that it provokes emotional and unconscious as well as intellectual reactions.

At the same time DeLillo’s text describes various patterns of reaction whose common trait consists in the tension between linguistic denotation and connotation. On the one hand, the actual, the remembered, and the signitively imitated fall are associated for most of the protagonists with turning points in their lives,<sup>65</sup> that are related to a loss of their ability to communicate due to an illness or trauma<sup>66</sup> that finds its expression in *Ersatz*-actions<sup>67</sup> or images.<sup>68</sup>

On the other hand, the text presents linguistic strategies beyond conceptual language with which the alien becomes tellable and controllable. It is reminiscent of the language of the Innuït, that manifests a different temporal structure as a language made up of syllables rather than a language made up of letters, and it names at great length the private language of children that is analogous to myth, in which the threatening

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<sup>63</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 255.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 192.

<sup>65</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 114.

<sup>68</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 238, 240.

alien figure, Osama bin Laden for the adults, is transformed into the figure of "Bill Lawton."<sup>69</sup>

In addition to this presentation of ways of speaking that point back to the historical beginnings of the linguistic appropriation of the world, the text explicates dissonant images of bodies that cross out the physical integrity of the human subject. It does not treat the real body as an aesthetic sign as the photographer Drew does, but rather provides two counter-images to this construction. The first is the new experience of bodily integrity that precisely at the moment of a catastrophe is set free, and the other is the image of the human body as "organic shrapnel,"<sup>70</sup> in which even mere corporality appeared unnatural.

The unique catastrophe in DeLillo's text explicates its particularity not as an event in historical time but as a metaphor for the primordial history of socialization. Narration adopts the authentic pictures and transforms them at the same time by confronting them with other orders. It is precisely in this interplay of different media that a new space is opened up for experience, one that allows new possibilities of perception and experience to arise out of the reconstruction of historical experience, possibilities that escape the grasp of ideological interpretation. In the end, the linguistic play of the literary text overcomes the limitations of the dominant European and American political discourses.

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<sup>69</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 5–97.

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