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Book Review

Fantasy and Desire in the Age of Terrorism: Verso’s series on September 11th

With all the weight now attributed to September 11th as the near-sacred event which serves as rationale for all sorts of actions both extreme (e.g. invasions of Iraq) and mundane (e.g. American flag window decals) in nature, the danger in writing about its aftermath is to do so in a way that does not add to its mystical power, but instead opens its meaning for contestation. To that end, Verso publishers in 2002 released a three book series on the topic of September 11th, written by maverick thinkers Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Slavoj Zizek. While Virilio’s contribution to the collection, titled Ground Zero, for the most part focuses on what he dubs “techno-scientific solipistic m” and “the prohibition to prohibit” as a background to the current world order and only tangentially on terrorism, the war on terror, etc.; the other two books, The Spirit of Terrorism by Baudrillard and Welcome to the Desert of the Real by Zizek, are refreshingly timely reformulations and applications of these authors’ well-honed analytics. Here the authors link their favorite subjects—desire, perception of free choice, Hollywood, consumerism, death, and authenticity—to the 800-pound gorilla of the contemporary scene.

To best do justice to these works, which largely succeed in the task of clarifying the impact of this event that has caused such a rupture in the discourse on what globalization entails, the bulk of my effort here will be put towards an attempt to read Baudrillard and Zizek’s works off of each other, supplementing
them with points from Virilio’s contribution when appropriate.

The Spirit of the Real

As noted above, one of the strengths of these works is that the authors took up the opportunity to seriously re-examine old positions and reformulate them in a new context. Perhaps the most radical of these reversals is performed by Baudrillard, who in the early 1990’s—in the context of a system of generalized and generally non-eventful exchanges whose hegemony seemed so complete that it no longer appeared to possess an outside—famously proposed that “The Gulf War did not happen,” at least for Westerners who experienced it via CNN as a bodiless surgical operation.

In light of September 11th, Baudrillard for the first time, perhaps since 1968, sees a changed terrain, in which the cycle of stable, banal exchange has been broken. By the second page of his essay, he declares “events are on no longer on strike...we have before us [with September 11] the absolute event” (Baudrillard 4-5). To Baudrillard, the symbolically-charged suicide attack of that day is “the act that restores an irreducible singularity” to the field of exchange, because the perpetrators did not seek “to transform the world, but to radicalize the world by sacrifice” (Baudrillard 9). In response to such an act, a West tied to the ideal of a zero-death system—where, like in the Gulf War, there are no bodies and no human suffering, just the comforting image of machines blowing up machines—is left impotent. Death has been brought to an America designed to hide it at all costs; any acting out against the threat will produce bodies other than those of the people who exchanged their lives for the ability to perpetrate the terrorist act. Baudrillard sees this as the beginning of the path to suicide for a system of generalized exchange—where once hidden bodies will start to pile up and the free flow of meaning will be stalled by ever-more-powerful police states. And in this suicide, there will be a possibility for something else to emerge.

Zizek—whose analytic strategy has been described by Judith Butler as “a string of endless reversals”—once again takes the role of contrarian. Unlike Baudrillard, who believes fully in the singular importance of the attacks and tries to unpack what that might be, Zizek begins by asking what if—against the standard formulation that “September 11 changed everything”—it, in fact, changed nothing? What if, far from activating the death drive of consumerism, all the attack ended up doing was refocusing and strengthening American hegemonic practices? The immediate responses seemed to reinforce this: a return to solipsistic patriotism among Americans and the quick decision to bomb the Afghan state to stop a trans-national network. Similarly, he wonders if the culture built on the avoidance of death in the homeland has actually been disturbed by noting how, unlike the bloody images of African or Balkan genocides that were always accompanied by a warning that the material you were about to see is of a sensitive nature, September 11th remained largely exposed-corpse free. For Zizek, all such reactions signal business as usual and allow most people to avoid what he considers to be the only radical act: namely for Americans to have insisted upon integrating the wider world into their reality and declare that “attacks like this should not happen anywhere.” Instead, America continues to act in its solipsistic manner, insisting “this shouldn’t happen to us.”

Indeed, Zizek criticizes not just those in the center or on the right for not taking such a position, but also those on the left. He also accuses them of not taking the proper action of saying, “no one should have a tortuous death.” Instead, Zizek argues they failed to fully sympathize with the victims, taking the ethnically suspect path of noting that the victims “had it coming for America’s crimes elsewhere,” or “so what, there were much worse genocides in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia.” To take such a position where deaths are compared in a kind of calculus of suffering, for Zizek, only feeds the misperception that the choice before is either “us or the terrorists” or “Bush or bin Laden.” This would be comparable to the false choice between “liberal democracy or totalitarianism,” which is arranged so that there is only one possible answer: the path of liberal democracy, since no one wants totalitarianism. What Zizek insists we must recognize is that, to paraphrase Stalin, “both choices are worse.” In his opinion, there is little difference between state sponsored murder and terrorist network murder, which leaves the real antagonism as “Bush and bin Laden vs. Us,” where global capitalism sits on one side and our best interests on the other.

That bin Laden must be considered to be on the side of global capitalism is one of Zizek’s most unique contributions. Zizek is critical of responses that identify Al-Qaeda and Islamic movements as anything but a product of modernism, despite what book titles like The Lexus and the Olive Tree and Jihad vs. McWorld seem to indicate. Firstly, Zizek
argues against the insistence that Islam never had a modern reformation, noting that Wahhabism, the dominant sect of Saudi Arabia, emerged during the 18th century as a purification movement par excellence. Secondly, he notes that most of the recruits for these movements live under monarchic/theocratic consumerist regimes in the Middle East, which survive because of the insatiable need for that ubercominmodity known as oil and stand as the “pervasive third term” to any clash of civilizations thesis. Finally, Zizek, as well as Baudrillard and Virilio, note how the terrorists rely on all those modern things like cell phones, air traffic, cable network news and even hiding places amidst the banality of suburban America to carry out their work.

Here, it is important to note Baudrillard’s take on the use of “everyday” technology by these groups. Like the choice of the twin towers as a target, Baudrillard sees the great symbolic blow such a utilization of techno-banality lands. By blending in, by looking like any immigrant in blue jeans and a fleece, the would-be hijackers presented no overt markers to distinguish themselves from other citizens. Thus by foregoing any hint of a visible “terrorist tell” (what that might be I don’t know), they open up everyone to the suspicion that they too might be willing to put their own lives into play in an act of radicality. By making everyone a suspect, the system will have to engage in ever greater levels of surveillance, and as Virilio put it, we will be faced with the prospect of a “global covert state against an unknown quantity of private criminality.”

Interestingly, both Zizek and Baudrillard go on to argue that the hijackers are not simply just as modern as everyone else, that in fact their interests are completely bound to the current order want to see it crumble. As evidence, he presents the genre of Hollywood disaster flicks, in which perverse pleasure at the destruction of the hegemon is exercised in a barrage of special effects. Zizek also highlights the fantasy/libidinal content of Hollywood films—though not just by connecting disaster movies to loss of holistic bliss, but also movies in which the main character learns that their entire life is a sanitized show, such as The Matrix and The Truman Show. For Zizek, the real surprise is not that the attacks were unprecedented, but that we got what we wished for—a reality that is as harsh and violent as we always feared, in which there is no big Other maintaining our blissful organic existence, our “pagan happiness.”

So what shatters this happy existence? Here again the authors agree, all arguing that the timeworn language of antagonism either cannot or will not be deployed in the war on terrorism. Baudrillard notes that to have an antagonism, their must be an external, bounded, enemy to fight. This is what military planners in the U.S. wish for, because in such a conflict the technological superiority of the United States would ensure victory. The problem such planners face is that terrorism is viral in nature—it lies dormant inside the system itself. Thus striking out externally (as in the case of Iraq) allows the opportunity for more internal growth of the virus.

While Zizek agrees that the time when antagonism would be used to justify force has passed us by, he does not believe this to be a recent development. After the attacks of 9/11, the United States only continued its role of “world policeman,” a title it had held since the end of the Cold War (and its last great opponent) while disciplining rogue states and calming “irrationally Balkanized” ethnic conflict. In cases like Somalia...
and Kosovo, the United States came not to face an enemy, but to housebreak “bad children” in the name of “human rights.” Similarly, the fight against terrorists, despite being dubbed a “War,” functions on the level of a “non-War” in the sense that terror suspects are not treated as enemy combatants because they are seen as stateless, while at the same time they are not treated as criminals, leaving them no rights to legal representation, supposedly because they have renounced civility in favor of chaos. Again, in this situation, the Other is hystricized, and thus not worthy of a being treated as a true opponent.

The final piece of the anti-antagonistic puzzle is presented by Virilio, who notes that another reason old discourses of antagonistic warfare are on the way out is that antagonism implied a face to face duel, a dual presence. For him, an irresistible opportunity to dehumanize killing and divert guilt and culpability arises from these devastating military attacks that can be carried out remotely by someone sitting at a computer hundreds of miles away.

Conclusions

Any writing on 9/11, in order to be effective, must de-sanctify, or at least re-sanctify, it. Excluding Virilio’s entry, which seems like a lecture he would have given pre-9/11 with only cosmetic changes, what you see are two different conclusions emanating from the same ground of desire, fantasy and exchange.

For Baudrillard, who deems the terrorists acts as wholly “immoral” and real in their devastating effects, the attack is akin to what Walter Benjamin would refer to as a break-out of messianic time, something that disrupts the endless cycle of meaninglessness. Even if this is something that begins to hurl the system of universalized exchange towards a suicidal void, Baudrillard seems to have hope—and dare I say an excitement which stands in contrast to his pessimism of recent years—that out of this, something other than an Orwellian style doom might await us on the other side; that something will happen to awaken people’s desires to keep the hegemonic system from re-asserting itself.

For Zizek, instead of a messianic moment of potential redemption, recent events once again leave us with the false choice between “liberal democracy and totalitarianism.” For him, all 9/11 did, besides cause the needless death of countless individuals, was to allow the hegemonic power to more overtly carry out its usual tasks, while at the same time deploy a climate of fear to silence anti-globalist and leftist opposition. The only radical act is to reject the binary of Bush or bin Laden and to accept that the struggle is against both of them in the name of all victims of violence. Do this, Zizek suggests, or risk allowing your freedom to keep you enslaved. His central point is that through the language of a non-war against irrational nuisances, the hegemonic powers will try to keep that still existing class antagonism hidden. For Zizek, what must be done is to keep it visible at all costs.

That Zizek and Baudrillard start from the same analytic ground and come to different conclusions is both the great strength and weakness of their contributions as a unit. On the one hand, the fact they are writing on the same subject provides a wonderful opportunity to draw distinctions between their theoretical positions. On the other hand, their focus on a consumption dominated, media saturated, liberal democracy (even if it is absolutely supposed to be opposed) becomes rather narrow.

While their common ground has many virtues—such as their treatment of Muslim countries as part of a consumerist system, instead of as radically other— their generalization of the systems of exchange completely eschews the anthropological reality that fantasy, desire and consumption might operate in a diversity of ways. What was missed with Virilio’s largely tangential contribution was the opportunity to bring in someone who would have provided a starker contrast, perhaps a post-colonial theorist or, even more radically, post-Lacanian Julia Kristeva, who would have offered a very different look at the fantastic content of September 2001.

Nonetheless, Baudrillard’s and, most especially Zizek’s, slim tomes truly stand as contributions to the discourse on September 11th.