

EXCERPT

International Journal of Baudrillard Studies
Volume 3, Number 2 (July 2006)
Virtuality and Events: The Hell of Power¹

Jean Baudrillard

(Paris, France).

Translated by Chris Turner.

Two images: that of the bronze technocrat, bent over his brief-case, sitting on a bench at the foot of the Twin Towers, or, rather shrouded in the dust of the collapsed towers like one of those bodies found in the ruins of Pompeii. He was, so to speak, the signature of the event, the pathetic ghost of a global power hit by an unforeseeable catastrophe.

Another figure: that of that artist working in his studio in the Towers on a sculpture of himself – his body pierced with aeroplanes – intended to stand on the plaza of the World Trade Centre like a modern Saint Sebastian.²

He was still working on it on the morning of 11 September when he was swept away, together with his sculpture, by the very event the work prefigured. The supreme consecration for a work of art: to be realized by the very event that destroys it.

Two allegories of an exceptional, earth-shattering event, cutting at a stroke through the monotony of a declared end of history. The only event worthy of the name, contrasting starkly with the non-event to which we are condemned by the hegemony of a world order nothing must disturb.

At this present stage of a networking of all functions – of the body, of time, of language – of a drip-feeding of all minds, the slightest event is a threat; even history is a threat.

It is going to be necessary, then, to invent a security system that prevents any event whatever from occurring. A whole strategy of deterrence that does service today for a global strategy. Steven Spielberg's recent film, *Minority Report*, provides an illustration of such a system. On the basis of brains endowed with a gift of pre-cognition (the "precogs"), who identify imminent crimes before they occur, squads of police (the "precrimes") intercept and neutralize the criminal before he has committed his crime. There is a variant in the film *Dead Zone* (directed by David Cronenberg): the hero, who, following a serious accident, is also endowed with powers of divination, ends up killing a politician whose future destiny as a war criminal he foresees. This is the scenario of the Iraq war too: the crime is nipped in the bud on the strength of an act that has not taken place (Saddam's use of weapons of mass destruction). The question is clearly whether the crime would really have taken place. But we shall never know. What we have here, then, is the real repression of a virtual crime. Extrapolating from this, we can see looming beyond the war a systematic de-programming not only of all crime, but of anything that might disturb the order of things, the policed order of the planet. This is what "political" power comes down to today. It is no longer driven by any positive will; it is merely a negative power

of deterrence, of public health, of security policing, immunity policing, prophylaxis.

This strategy is directed not only at the future, but also at past events – for example, at that of 11 September, where it attempts, by war in Afghanistan and Iraq, to erase the humiliation. This is why this war is at bottom a delusion, a virtual event, a “non-event”. Bereft of any objective or finality of its own, it merely takes the form of an incantation, an exorcism. This is also why it is interminable, for there will never be any end to conjuring away such an event. It is said to be preventive, but it is in fact retrospective, its aim being to defuse the terrorist event of 11 September, the shadow of which hovers over the whole strategy of planetary control. Erasure of the event, erasure of the enemy, erasure of death: in the insistence on “zero casualties” we see the very same imperative as applies in this obsession with security.³

The aim of this world order is the definitive non-occurrence of events. It is, in a sense, the end of history, not on the basis of a democratic fulfillment, as Fukuyama has it, but on the basis of preventive terror, of a counter-terror that puts an end to any possible events. A terror which the power exerting it ends up exerting on itself under the banner of security.

There is a fierce irony here: the irony of an anti-terrorist world system that ends up internalizing terror, inflicting it on itself and emptying itself of any political substance – and going so far as to turn on its own population.

Is this a remnant of the Cold War and the balance of terror? But this time it's a deterrence without cold war, a terror without balance. Or rather it is a universal cold war, ground into the tiniest interstices of social and political life.

This headlong rush by power into its own trap reached dramatic extremes in the Moscow theatre episode, when the hostages and the terrorists were jumbled together in the same massacre. Exactly as in Mad Cow Disease: you kill the whole herd as a precautionary measure – God will recognize his own. Or as in Stockholm Syndrome: being jumbled together in death makes them virtually partners in crime (it is the same in *Minority Report*: the fact that the police seize the presumptive criminal before he has done anything proves *a posteriori* that he cannot be innocent).

And this is, in fact, the truth of the situation: the fact is that, one way or another, populations themselves are a terrorist threat to the authorities. And it is the authorities themselves who, by repression, unwittingly set the seal on this complicity. The equivalence in repression shows that we are all potentially the hostages of the authorities.

By extension, we can hypothesize a coalition of all governments against all populations – we have had a foretaste of this with the war in Iraq, since it was able to take place in defiance of world opinion, with the more or less disguised assent of all governments. And if the world-wide demonstrations against war may have produced the illusion of a possible counter-power, they demonstrated above all the political insignificance of this “international community” by comparison with American *Realpolitik*.