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## *Planewreck with Spectators*

### *Terrorism and Media Attention<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

This article explores semiotic and philosophical aspects of the media coverage of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The main thesis is that these attacks optimally satisfied the selection criteria for attention of both the media and the audience. This thesis is explained in four subsequent theses that analyze different dimensions of the *semiotics of terror*: the temporal aspect of media attention, the aesthetics of the images, the redundancy of the coverage, and the mystification and glorification of the terrorist action. This is followed by some media ethical considerations, and an outlook on media coverage of terrorism and the war in Afghanistan.

Attention is the most precious good of mass communication because only a few issues can be processed at once. Additionally, the audience members' attention spans are short. But the media depend on the same economy of attention as their audience. Attention to one topic is edged out by its competitors in the marketplace of public issues. News selection criteria (*news values*) can be understood as *media attention rules*: sensationalism, violence, negativism, surprise, dynamics, identification, and spatial and cultural proximity.

In the following analysis, I will unfold the thesis that terrorist action usually satisfies these criteria and that the September 11 terrorists planned their attacks with a clear understanding of these media attention rules: They organized and executed their attacks anticipating the media impact and the symbolic power that the worldwide

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broadcasted images would have. Thus, the terrorists, who despise modern technology and the democratic media society, are simultaneously experts in the use of them.<sup>2</sup> There is a *media semiotics of terror* that worked exactly as the terrorists intended.

My following four theses explain different aspects of this complex topic: First, I will discuss the temporal dimension of the events and their media coverage. I will then analyze their aesthetic aspect, particularly with respect to fascination with the dreadful images. This is followed by some reflections upon the meaning of the ritualistic repetition of the images. Finally, I will discuss the relationship between mystification and glorification of terrorist action. In my closing remarks, I will raise some questions concerning the media ethical dimension of these events and their media coverage, followed by an outlook on media coverage of terrorism and the war in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

### *1. Timing*

*Thesis: The terrorists reached the largest live audience possible, because most people around the globe were awake. Instantaneously, the shocking events profoundly interrupted the normal flow of time. Moreover, real-time coverage guaranteed immediate global information on the events, yet greatly hindered thoughtful journalism.*

The symbolic space of time is, to a large extent, constructed by the synchronizing effects of modern technology and particularly the media (Elias, 1992). Consequently, this interruption of time would not have been possible without the media. The psychological earthquake of the events sent its shockwaves through the media into the farthest regions of the globe.<sup>4</sup> The sudden interruption of the flow of time by the 9/11

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<sup>2</sup> This is, however, nothing new: "In innumerable instances in the past and doubtless more to follow, terrorist outrages have been planned and timed so as to exploit the media to its absolute limits and to attract maximum publicity. ... The terrorists show no hesitation or lack of skill in exploiting the benefits of democracy—in this case an open press—in order to subvert democracy." (Hermon 1990, p. 38)

<sup>3</sup> I am using the form of an essayistic explanation of *theses* rather than that of a research report because this paper is a *theoretical analysis* of semiotic and philosophical aspects rather than an empirical study.

<sup>4</sup> Again, this is not a new phenomenon: "Modern media technology has made the terrorists' task all too easy. In a few minutes, a terrorist group can place its signature on an atrocity and have its claims beamed around the world. The Munich Olympic massacre of 1972 was beamed to an estimated worldwide audience of more than 500 million." (Wilkinson, 1990, p. 31)

attacks had apocalyptic elements. Time seemed to have come to an end, or at least to a sudden stop. Interruption of the normal flow of time by a shocking event has always been regarded as a sign of a new beginning. The reaction to this interruption was that nothing would be the same as before the incident. This disruption of the temporal structure of our media-synchronized society has to be understood as an important part of terrorist strategy. It guarantees and focuses media attention and, at the same time, creates a ubiquitous and diffuse atmosphere of insecurity, fear, and terror:

“Terrorists use news organizations as their advertising agencies, recruiting them into providing intense coverage to increase the societal impact of an attack. Terrorists use sensational and innovative methods of attack, select high-profile targets, submit prepared messages directly to news organizations, and even attack the news organizations themselves to boost coverage.” (Dietz, 2002, § 4)

In the case of the 9/11 events, the global media system – the infosphere – created a worldwide synchronization of attention, thus establishing an extraordinary order of time and life: The whole world was watching the events in real time or very shortly after the events occurred. The urgency and sheer enormity of the events caused an extended period of mostly live coverage and improvised voice-overs with little editorial filtering. Thoughtful journalism, analytical reflection, and detachment were almost impossible, partly because of the powerful, horrific images and partly because the events were still unfolding. Real-time coverage leaves little space for reflection and in-depth information. The lack of background is, in fact, characteristic for the coverage of terrorist action and has to be understood in the context of a situation where television reports generally “concentrate on violence at the expense of background contextualization” (Miller, 1994, p. 72). This tendency was obviously exacerbated by the monstrosity of the events and the extraordinary time pressure that they created. The broadcast media were mostly confined to real-time coverage of the crude facts, without much consideration of why all this could happen and what it actually would mean. Thus, real-time coverage paid a high price for its advantages and it took days before more in-depth analysis surfaced in these media.

## 2. *Aesthetics*

Thesis: *The aesthetic effect of the airplanes crashing into the WTC towers was so horrific that the event was perceived as impossible. The terrorists created new signifieds without signifiers – objects with incomprehensible meanings. The aesthetics of terror has striking similarities with Burke’s and Kant’s notion of the “sublime.”*

The sheer magnitude of the events was incomprehensible. There were no words and no signifiers that would have been adequate to describe the events. Whereas postmodern media philosophy is concerned with the flood of signifiers without signifieds, these events showed the power of the reverse situation: signifieds for which there were no signifiers. Therefore, most TV networks restricted their immediate coverage to a repetition of the images.

Additional images were shown when new footage was available, yet there was no other language available to describe the meaning of the events than metaphors and similes, such as the oft-repeated comparison to Pearl Harbor.<sup>5</sup> The lack of appropriate language was not just restricted to the attacks but also included the response: The linguistic confusion turned into embarrassment when President Bush used the highly charged *crusade* metaphor for retaliation, as well as when the planned military action was dubbed “Infinite Justice.” Even after this name was dropped, Wild West metaphors dominated and continue to dominate the discourse on the military response.

As remarked by Weigel (2001), the fascination of the horrible images can be explained with Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime. In his essay on the origin of the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, Burke (1901/1756-57, p. 36) proclaims:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

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<sup>5</sup> The author of this article is currently conducting a research project on the metaphors that were used by the media in the context of the 9/11 events. A typical example is the “Special Report” from *U.S. News and World Report*, (September 24, 2001, p. 10 ff.), which has the headline: “The terrorists flew on *devil’s wings* [my italics] in a horrifying moment, singular in history. They changed the course of a presidency, a nation, and, quite likely, the world.” The article repeats the Pearl Harbor reference, and goes through a variety of different metaphors to describe and capture the events.

He points out that “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime“ (p. 52). Burke finally asserts that “the sublime is built on terror,” which seems to be contrary to delight and pleasure (p. 112). However, in order to become “a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror,” pain and terror have to be “modified as not to be actually noxious, if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of a person...” (p.114). Burke does not further explain how this modification is to be understood, because he is more interested in showing that even “non dangerous” objects can cause feelings similar to terror if they are grand enough. According to Burke, it is physiological strain exerted by impressive objects on the organs of perception that ultimately causes the feeling of terror and subsequently the idea of the sublime.

Immanuel Kant, however, criticizes the idea of a direct connection between terror and the sublime. Like Burke, he states "We call that *sublime* which is *absolutely great*" (Kant, 1960/1790, p. 86), and continues “if nature is to be judged by us as dynamically sublime, it must be represented as exciting fear” (p. 99). But then he emphasizes that “it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously felt” (p. 100). Instead, he states that the sight of a terrifying object or event

... is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, *provided only that we are in security*; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature. (p. 100 f.)

There seems to be an intriguing dialectic between the degree of terror and the degree of security that enables us to withstand and even enjoy the terrifying object.<sup>6</sup>

Kant differs from Burke in his emphasis on the *unharmful observer*, which is a motif that can be found in aesthetics since Lucretius’ “*De Rerum Natura*,” as has been eloquently reconstructed by Blumenberg (1990). In his renowned book “*Shipwreck with Spectator*,” Blumenberg argues that aesthetic pleasure is derived from the consciousness of a secure, detached perspective that allows the spectator to observe

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<sup>6</sup> Local news about criminals, and also the whole genre of suspense, disaster, and horror movies, seem to be built upon this very dialectics.

the troubled ocean and the shipwreck from a safe distance. The continuous fascination that the images of the terrorist attacks exerted on the media audience is more comprehensible once we take into account that it can build upon a plenitude of models from various mass media genres: This globally televised *planewreck with spectator* is the ultimate form of reality TV, for which disaster movies (such as “Armageddon” and “Deep Impact” with their crumbling skyscrapers and fleeing masses) provided the background imagery. Thus, the position of the unharmed observer of the catastrophic disaster has been ingrained in the audience in an almost behaviorist way. At the same time, the authenticity<sup>7</sup> and tragedy of the events enable the observer to become sympathetically absorbed in the creation of a community feeling that is based on identification with the victims of this *mythic tragedy*:

News reports on terrorism perhaps can be studied and understood as part of a larger process of purification and degradation, a social drama of victimage in which the death of the terrorist victims becomes an opportunity for a people to acknowledge and affirm community life. (Lule 1990, p. 44)

### 3. Redundancy

*Thesis: The media society reacted with full attention to and ritualized repetition of the dreadful images. Background information that might have helped to create a more nuanced understanding of the events was scarce in the hours after the attacks.*

The terrorists knew that they could count on the full attention of the media. Nothing could satisfy *media attention rules*<sup>8</sup> more than a terrorist mass murder that is brought about by a collision of the two main symbols of the western world: mass transportation’s advanced technology represented by large capacity airplanes, and the capitalist economy’s advanced bureaucracy represented by high-tech skyscrapers. The “attention-terror” (Rötzer 2001) of terrorist propaganda actions draws on the sublime

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<sup>7</sup> Luhmann (1984) holds the view that the „quasi-oral relationship to time“ as is found in real-time filming adds a particular “credibility bonus“ to the media by letting the event appear more authentic.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the classic study of Galtung & Ruge (1965), and for a typical analysis of news values Peltu (1985), who presents the following list of news values: 1. immediacy and event-orientation, 2. drama and conflict, 3. negativity (bad news has drama and conflict), 4. human interest, 5. photographability, 6. simple story lines, 7 topicality (current news frames), 8. media cannibalism, 9. exclusivity, 10 status of information source, 11. local interest.

and the sudden shock of the unforeseen atrocity, thus forcing the media to dedicate their full attention to the events. Moreover, as Laqueur (1999) points out, the media are in a strange, almost symbiotic relationship with terrorism because of the high news value of terrorist action:<sup>9</sup>

The terrorists need the media, and the media find in terrorism all the ingredients of an exciting story. ... Media coverage has supplied constant grist to the terrorist mill; it has magnified the political importance of many terrorist acts out of all proportion. (p. 44)

Only this media attention, of course, allowed the terrorist attacks to turn into a globally disseminated *planewreck with spectators*. The media as our window to the world have made the position of the unharmed observer conveniently available to a worldwide audience. This is not to say that the audience of the 9/11 events was not deeply shocked and disturbed. Never before had a mass murder of this magnitude been broadcast in real-time, and the shock of it rendered the country insecure and overwhelmed. Yet, there was a strange fascination of the images that glued millions of people to their TV sets, even though they would not learn anything new and would only see the same horrible sequence again and again. During the first week, public voices gradually started to express growing unease with the repetition of these images, as illustrated by Howard Kurtz' editorial in the *Washington Post* (Sept. 14, 2001):

Will the networks please – please – stop showing the planes crashing into the World Trade Center as scene-setters for their opening credits? As “bumpers” before commercial breaks? As video wallpaper while talking heads are being interviewed? As split-screen diversion while Ari Fleischer is briefing reporters? The sheer repetition trivializes and dehumanizes the tragedy...

This protest against familiarization and trivialization of tragic events by the media is nothing new, and it is - paradoxically enough - usually expressed by the media themselves (Deledalle-Rhodes 1997).

The repetition of the crash and collapse sequences was indeed one of the most disturbing aspects of the coverage during the first hours and days after the attacks. Yet,

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<sup>9</sup> For similar arguments on the role of the media, see also the contributions in Alexander & Latta 1990.

there was a ritual element in the repetition that seemed continuously to conjure up the events. It was as if the ritual made them understandable as real events:

Graphic form, rhythmic form (the footage of the jet smashing into the second tower repeated up to 30 times per hour), and increasingly, narrative form – all gave coherence to events that were still difficult to comprehend. (Uricchio 2001)

The most frequently repeated image of the attack was the ABC footage in which the second plane approached the South Tower from the right and then crashed into it: The *directionality* of the plane in this sequence is of particular interest. As semiotic studies on the meaning potential of images have shown,<sup>10</sup> a person or object moving from the left to the right indicates “going away,” or “leaving,” at least in the Western culture. Contrary to this, moving from the right to the left indicates “coming back from,” or even “coming home.” Thus, the incidental camera perspective of this particular sequence created a powerful connotation that strongly underscored a feeling that terror has finally come to us - to our homeland.

As already mentioned, the sheer size and drama of the events left little room for background information that might have helped to create a more complex understanding of the attacks. The main contextualization offered by the media was a “simple narrative of good versus evil” (Uricchio 2001) instead of an explanation of the complex situation:

... the choice of an antagonist who embodies the antithesis of our values (a multi-millionaire who has rejected consumerism, a terrorist who seems deeply religious) helped to mute the complexity of the 18 or so terrorists who destroyed themselves along with their helpless victims. Bin Laden's casting helped to keep narrative causality elegantly simple: evil. (ibid.)

As Uricchio (2001) furthermore points out, the framing of the events as an “American story” with an emphasis on domestic coverage (*Attack on America* and *America's New War* etc.) reduced the events to a confrontation between “us” as a nation and “them,” without exploring alternative points of view.<sup>11</sup> This constellation set the tone for the

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<sup>10</sup> See Jewitt & Oyama (2001) and Landsch (1981).

<sup>11</sup> This, of course, raises the difficult “what if” question. Would there have been other alternatives? How could a different media coverage have looked like? Yet, these questions are not just

subsequent war in Afghanistan as a matter of American decision-making. It seems that even now, more than six months after the events, the simple narrative remains the guiding principle of the public discourse on this topic. The implicit identification of the Taliban with Bin Laden and the Al Quaida organization is the most striking example of this principle. Another illustration is publicly labeling Bin Laden as a coward who is hiding in caves of the realm of darkness and evil<sup>12</sup> (while, ironically, parts of the American government were hiding in subterranean facilities, too).

#### *4. Mystification and Glorification*

*Thesis: This faceless, baseless, and authorless terrorism leaves nothing but disturbing insecurity. It is pure terrorism in that it seems to have neither rational goals nor an actor claiming accountability, and only aims at maximizing material and symbolic wreckage. Its demonization in the Western media, however, is the source for its simultaneous glorification in (parts of) the Islamic World.*

The attack had strong mystifying elements, ranging from the complete surprise effect that this attack had on a wholly unprepared nation, to the fact that almost nothing was known about the terrorists, their goals, and their motivation. This was aggravated in that the government and the media seemed to be completely unprepared for any such event. Both politicians and pundits were taken by surprise and reacted with fruitless questions, such as “why are they doing this to us?” and “why do they hate us so much?” This inability to provide any explanatory information and background analysis demonstrated not only a failure of military and civil intelligence but also an unfamiliarity with the phenomenon of international terrorism.

Beyond cultural explanations (such as the inconceivability of the U.S. being attacked on its own soil), this lack of information and understanding can be interpreted as a communication failure between different societal subsystems: Even though one can

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pointless. For an interesting discussion of the possibilities of alternative coverage of the Gulf War, see Halliday (1999, pp. 135-143).

<sup>12</sup> A similar simplification and denigration happened during the Gulf War, when “Saddam Hussein and his associates were said to be avoiding attacks in a cowardly manner by ‘hiding in hotels’...” (Halliday, 1999, p. 135).

argue that the various intelligence agencies failed in this particular case, there already existed a plenitude of studies on international terrorism, its means and goals, and its relation to the media. To put it in the terminology of systems theory: there was a lack of exchange of information among the scientific system, the political system, and the media system.

A particularly interesting study by Kushner (1998) extensively discusses the various groups and forms of international terrorism and the danger they pose to the American society. In retrospect, it seems almost ironic that the author refers repeatedly to the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and states that “the World Trade Center bombing and the plot to destroy other New York City landmarks are prime examples of IRT [international radical terrorism, B.D.]” (p. 49). An even more chilling irony is the cover of this very book, that shows a schematic drawing of the two towers and one of them as a target in a red crosshair (see figure 2). The author also holds the clear-sighted view that “the World Trade Center bombing shattered the illusion that the United States is immune from the hands of the new terrorists” (p. 51).

Mystification also pertains to the terrorists’ seeming lack of rational goals and accountability. However, this kind of asymmetrical warfare only profits from its irrational barbarism, unpredictability, and maximized material and symbolic wreckage. In fact, the literature on the relationship between terrorism and the media shows clearly that the 9/11 attacks followed the usual pattern of terrorist propaganda and media attention. As Wilkinson (1990) points out, terrorist action has four main objectives:

1. To convey the propaganda of the deed and to create extreme fear among their target group.
2. To mobilize wider support for their cause among the general population and international opinion by emphasizing such themes as the righteousness of their cause and the inevitability of their victory.
3. To frustrate and disrupt the response of the government and security forces, for example by suggesting that all their practical antiterrorist measures are inherently tyrannical and counterproductive or an unnecessary overreaction.

4. To mobilize, incite, and boost their constituency of actual and potential supporters and in so doing to increase recruitment, raise more funds, and inspire further attacks. (pp. 30f.)

It is most likely that the global media coverage helped to fulfill these goals despite - or maybe even because of - its mystifying qualities. The second goal does not apply directly and was not fulfilled because it is international rather than domestic terrorism (therefore this goal is identical, in this case, with the fourth objective). This is why the constant media coverage inevitably indicated the attack's success - merely broadcasting the symbolically highly charged images of the collapsing towers can already be read as successful instances of the *propaganda of the deed*. Potential sympathizers would understand the terrorists' martyrdom as heroic and as an incitement to follow them. Moreover, the worldwide dissemination of the terrorists' names and pictures turned them into media stars, which only magnified their glory. Thus, the demonization of the terrorists in the Western media, at the same time, provides a source of their *glorification* in their home base.<sup>13</sup>

### *Conclusion and Outlook*

Media coverage of the events has received mostly positive reviews. Yet, there is an unsettling pattern in the coverage that can be described as *abstention from background analysis* and *taming by narration*. The understandable attempt to make sense of these disruptive events rapidly led to a simplifying and mainstreaming narrative centered on a desire for retaliation in the "monumental struggle of good versus evil," as President Bush proclaimed and the media echoed. Looking back, one might ask whether shock, anger, and grief were channeled too conveniently into a "New War" without exploring other options. At the same time, the terrorists were able to send a powerful signal through their globally broadcast *propaganda of deed*. The human, material, and symbolic damage of the attacks was so unfathomable that it received full and unparalleled media attention. The undivided attention of audience members in their

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<sup>13</sup> This is of course an intended effect, which refers back to the previously discussed symbiosis between terrorism and the media.

position as unharmed spectators was the necessary complement to the media's attention.

This poses some media ethical questions, such as: How can the media cope with and understand events of this magnitude? Do we need to reconsider the basic habits and conventions of our media society? Are there ways for the media to deal with such events that neither abet the terrorists, nor create a falsely comforting narrative of patriotism and counterstrike?

There are certainly no easy answers to these questions. It is quite possible that the media, particularly real-time media, are in fact *necessarily* overwhelmed with events of this dimension. Background information and analysis requires some time for reflection and research, and time is scarce when dramatic events rapidly follow one another. Nevertheless, the media's almost naive and superficial approach to the events indicates a lack of understanding of foreign affairs and cultures that seems to be as widespread within the media as in politics. There may be two structural reasons for this:

Firstly and generally, American media have increasingly concentrated on domestic news and drastically cut down on foreign coverage throughout the past decades. This is, of course, a vicious circle where the dearth of information produces audience indifference, and vice versa.

Secondly, and more specifically, the 9/11 events happened at a time when CNN and "FOX News" were already competing fiercely for audience share. This race intensified as events unfolded. Sometimes it appeared that these networks focused more on who had the most dramatic on-the-spot coverage, the fastest running banners at the bottom of the screens, and the biggest flags on their lapels, rather than on in-depth coverage and background analysis.

One cannot claim, however, that this situation was completely new with respect to media ethics. There are in fact specific ethical guidelines in place that address the questions raised here. The "CBS News" Standards, for instance, recognize that coverage of terrorist action is indispensable but that "there must be thoughtful, conscientious care and restraint" (Alexander & Latter, 1990, p. 139). Coverage should neither "provide

an excessive platform for the terrorists” (p. 139), nor should it “unduly crowd out other important news of the hour/day” (p. 140). The sheer dimension of the events certainly made restraint and thoughtful coverage more difficult than for other terrorist events. Yet, it seems that such media ethical criteria were not much considered at the time.

In addition, the call for patriotism and counterstrike led very quickly to a situation in which critical words were stigmatized by the government as unpatriotic and intolerable, even when they were clearly satirical. Such was the case of Bill Maher’s remarks on the American use of cruise missiles. *Salon.com* editor Talbot’s account of the reaction of White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer is unsettling:

Fleischer used the Maher controversy to issue this creepy Orwellian pronouncement: “Americans need to watch what they say, what they do, and this is not the time for remarks like that; there never is.” (Creepier still, someone in the White House then took scissors to the official transcript of Fleischer’s remarks to make them less chilling.) (Talbot 2001)

Instances like this have brought the media and the political opposition in a position where any critical thought could be regarded as unpatriotic and as posing danger to the fight against terrorism.<sup>14</sup> However, the real danger lies in the possibility that the American media - who have been known for their incorruptible search for truth and their critical approach to government action - may find themselves increasingly in a situation where the lines are blurred between independence and patriotism, as well as between war coverage and propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See for example the firestorm that surrounded Tom Dashles measured criticism of the war’s prosecution in early March 2002, which spread beyond conservative pundits and swept up even mainstream media figures such as Peter Jennings (see Keefer 2002 and Nyhan 2002).

<sup>15</sup> I am alluding to the disturbing trend that government spokespersons, retired generals, and self-appointed war specialists constitute the “experts” in almost all TV and radio networks. Critical voices, not to mention outspoken pacifists, are usually not among these experts.

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