

**Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism:
Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle
on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday¹**

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Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent Terror War, Jean Baudrillard has written a series of reflections on the contemporary moment that have evoked the excitement and controversy of his earlier work. For many years, Baudrillard had complained that the contemporary era has been one of "weak events," that the energies of history seemed to be depleted, and that politics has become increasingly banal and boring. He claimed in an essay "Anorexic Ruins," published in 1989, that the Berlin wall was a sign of a frozen history, of an anorexic history, in which nothing more can happen, marked by a "lack of events" and the end of history, taking the Berlin wall as a sign of a stasis between communism and capitalism. Likewise, at one time, Baudrillard read the New York Twin Towers of the World Trade Center as symbols of the stasis of global capitalism and a frozen history in which the two superpowers develop a system of binary regulation.²

After the fall of the Berlin wall and collapse of Communism, Baudrillard continued to insist that ours was an era of "weak events" in which nothing significant had changed. Yet the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington seemed to be major events that elicited wide-ranging responses and produced significant changes, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and an attempt by the Bush administration to use 9/11 to push through rightwing extremist measures in the US and to achieve a new era of American military hegemony and empire, a drama still unfolding and perhaps full of future surprises.

Shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, Baudrillard wrote a paper "L'esprit du terrorisme" published November 2, 2001, in Le Monde. He argued that the assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon constituted a "strong event," that the attacks were "the ultimate event, the mother of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place." The "event strike," Baudrillard declared, was over and since this time he has continued to focus intensely on the dynamics and happenings of contemporary history. In this paper, I argue that Baudrillard's thought has been reignited by 9/11 and the subsequent Terror War which demonstrate the continuing relevance of some of his key categories and that have produced some of his most provocative recent work.

Baudrillard had long written on terrorism and was focusing reflection on globalization when the 9/11 attacks occurred. He quickly responded with the Le Monde article, soon after translated and expanded into one of the more challenging and controversial books on the terror spectacle, The Spirit of Terrorism: And Requiem for the Twin Towers (2002a). For Baudrillard, the 9/11 attacks represent a new kind of terrorism, exhibiting a "form of action which plays the game, and lays hold of the rules of the game, solely with the aim of disrupting it. ...they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power". That is, the terrorists in Baudrillard's reading used airplanes, computer networks, and the media associated with Western societies to produce a spectacle of terror. The attacks

evoked a global specter of terror that the very system of globalization and Western capitalism and culture were under assault by “the spirit of terrorism” and potential terrorist attacks anytime and anywhere.

For Baudrillard, “the speeches and commentaries made since September 11 betray a gigantic post-traumatic abreaction both to the event itself and to the fascination that it exerts. The moral condemnation and the sacred union against terrorism are directly proportional to the prodigious jubilation felt at having seen this global superpower destroyed.” Baudrillard perceived that the terrorists hope that the system will overreact in response to the multiple challenges of terrorism: “It is the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess”. The Bush administration, of course, responded with an excess of unilateral militarism in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has made a “war against terror” the fundament of its domestic and foreign policy, and infamously declared that “you are with us or against us,” in effect saying that anyone who did not support Bush’s “war on terror” was aiding and abetting “the enemy” and terrorism itself. For many of us, the Bush administration did what Baudrillard said the terrorists would want them to do, in terms of overreaction to the 9/11 attacks that would melt the initial sympathy for the US and that would win recruits for the terrorists reacting against the excess violence and aggression of the US response. Immediately after 9/11, the French paper Le Monde headlined a commentary “Nous sommes tous les Americains,” but after the rancorous debate over Bush’s Iraq intervention, the US found itself alienated from longtime allies, facing a proliferation of new enemies, and engaged in what the Bush administration described as a new era of “war on terror,” with no end in sight.³

In Baudrillard’s view, the 9/11 attacks represented “the clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself” and unfolded a “fourth world war”: “The first put an end to European supremacy and to the era of colonialism; the second put an end to Nazism; and the third to Communism. Each one brought us progressively closer to the single world order of today, which is now nearing its end, everywhere opposed, everywhere grappling with hostile forces. This is a war of fractal complexity, waged worldwide against rebellious singularities that, in the manner of antibodies, mount a resistance in every cell.”

Upon the initial publication of his response in French newspapers and its immediate translation into English and other languages, Baudrillard himself was accused of justifying terrorism when he stated in the article in Le Monde: “Because it was this insufferable superpower [i.e. the US] that gave rise both to the violence now spreading throughout the world and to the terrorist imagination that (without our knowing it) dwells within us all. That the entire world without exception had dreamed of this event, that nobody could help but dream of the destruction of so powerful a Hegemon —this fact is unacceptable to the moral conscience of the West. And yet it’s a fact nevertheless, a fact that resists the emotional violence of all the rhetoric conspiring to cover it up. In the end, it was they who did it, but we who wished it.”⁴

Baudrillard defended himself from accusations that such reflections constituted a virulent anti-Americanism or legitimization of terrorism, claiming: “I do not praise murderous attacks -- that would be idiotic. Terrorism is not a contemporary form of revolution against oppression and capitalism. No ideology, no struggle for an objective, not even Islamic fundamentalism, can explain it. ...I have glorified nothing, accused nobody, justified

nothing. One should not confuse the messenger with his message. I have endeavored to analyze the process through which the unbounded expansion of globalization creates the conditions for its own destruction".⁵

Indeed, Baudrillard has also produced some provocative reflections on globalization. In "The Violence of the Global," he distinguishes between the global and the universal, linking globalization with technology, the market, tourism, and information contrasted to identification of the universal with "human rights, liberty, culture, and democracy."⁶ While "globalization appears to be irreversible {,] universalization is likely to be on its way out." Elsewhere, Baudrillard writes: "...the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already fading from the minds and mores, and liberal globalization is coming about in precisely the opposite form -- a police-state globalization, a total control, a terror based on "law-and-order" measures. Deregulation ends up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions, akin to those of a fundamentalist society."⁷

Most theorists, including myself, see globalization as a matrix of market economy, democracy, technology, migration and tourism, and the worldwide circulation of ideas and culture. Baudrillard, curiously, takes the position of those in the anti-globalization movement who condemn globalization as the opposite of democracy and human rights. For Baudrillard, globalization is fundamentally a process of homogenization and standardization that crushes "the singular" and heterogeneity. This position, however, fails to note the contradictions that globalization simultaneously produces homogenization and hybridization and difference, and that the anti-corporate globalization movement is fighting for social justice, democratization, and increased rights, factors that Baudrillard links with a dying universalization. In fact, the struggle for rights and justice is an important part of globalization and Baudrillard's presenting of human rights, democratization, and justice as part of an obsolete universalization being erased by globalization is theoretically and politically problematical.⁸

Before 9/11, in Baudrillard's musings of the past two decades, the global postmodern condition has been one of absorbing otherness, of erasing difference, of assimilating and imploding all oppositional or negative forces into a viral positivity and virtuality. That is, Baudrillard saw globalization and technological development producing standardization and virtualization that was erasing individuality, social struggle, critique and reality itself as more and more people became absorbed in the hyper and virtual realities of media and cyberspace. In his view, the positive and the virtual radiate throughout every interstice of society and culture, irradiating into nullity any negativity, opposition, or difference. It is also an era in which reality itself has disappeared, constituting the "perfect crime" which is the subject of a book of that title (1996) and elaborated in The Vital Illusion (2000). Baudrillard presents himself here as a detective searching for the perpetrator of the "perfect crime," the murder of reality, "the most important event of modern history." His recurrent theme is the destruction and disappearance of the real in the realm of information and simulacra, and the subsequent reign of illusion and appearance. In a Nietzschean mode, he suggests that henceforth truth and reality are illusions, that illusions reign, and that therefore we should respect illusion and appearance and give up the illusory quest for truth and reality.

Yet in the 9/11 attacks and subsequent Terror War, difference and conflict have erupted upon the global stage and heterogeneous forces that global capitalism appears unable to absorb and assimilate have emerged that have produced what appears to be an era of intense conflict. Ideological apologists of globalization such as Thomas Friedman have

been forced to acknowledge that globalization has its dark sides and produces conflict as well as networking, interrelations, and progress. It remains to be seen, of course, how the current Terror War and intensified global conflicts will be resolved.

As a parenthetical aside, I sometimes muse that the abhorrent terror acts by the bin Laden network and other Jihadists, and the violent military response to the terrorist acts by the Bush administration, may be an anomalous paroxysm whereby a highly regressive premodern Islamic fundamentalism has clashed with an old-fashioned patriarchal and unilateralist Wild West militarism. It could be that such forms of terrorism, imperialism, and state repression will be superseded by more rational forms of politics that criminalize and marginalize terrorism, and that do not sacrifice the benefits of the open society and economy in the name of security. Yet the events of September 11 may open a new era of Terror War that will lead to the kind of apocalyptic futurist world depicted by cyberpunk fiction (see Kellner 2003b). Time will tell.

In any case, Baudrillard has continued to engage the events of contemporary history and to chart the vicissitudes of present-day culture, society, and politics. In an article in *Liberation* (May 19, 2004), “Pornographie de la Guerre,” Baudrillard compared the global circulation and impact of the images of 9/11 with the quasi-pornographic images of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse in Iraq by US troops. While 9/11, for Baudrillard, constituted an “electric shock to power” exerted from the outside, the Baghdad prison images reflected a “humiliation inflicted on power” and the shock of shame and bad conscience imposed by itself upon its imperial power. In both cases, there was a violent global reaction of the whole world exhibiting, “in the first case, a sentiment of prodigiousness,” and in the second “a sentiment of abjection.”

While September 11 was a major global event, Baudrillard claimed that the Iraqi prison abuse images constituted in themselves a non-event, of an “obscene banality, the atrocious but banal degradation, not merely of the victims but of the amateur stage-managers of this pornographic parody of violence.” The Abu Ghraib images were for Baudrillard a parody of violence and the Iraq war itself in which the “reality show” of the “the liberation of Iraq” became an “Ubiquitous and infantile” farcical spectacle of the impotency of American power

After justly chastising the American troops who created this obscene and pornographic spectacle of amateur photography, he adds that the rest of the Western world is complicit with this dehumanizing abuse and parody: “The bad conscience of the entire West crystallizes in the images; it is the whole of the West that is present in the sadistic smiles of the American soldiers, just as it is whole of the West that is behind the building of the Israeli wall.”

Previously, Baudrillard had claimed in “The spirit of terrorism” that much of the world was complicit with the event of 9/11 in dreaming that the superpower be put in its place and that urban and technological hypermodernity be punished for its arrogant colonization of everyday life, a fantasy regularly acted out in disaster films. The colonizing West was also complicit in the Iraqi prisoner abuse and torture scandal for only a deeply racist mentality could imagine and engage in such actions that put on display an unmastered racist brutality in the image of the now notorious woman MP Lynndie England posed with a leash around a naked Iraqi prisoner as if he was a dog, or US soldiers perversely constructing stacks of naked Iraqi bodies into sexually humiliating positions as if they were a horde of animals. The image of Lynndie England pointing to an Iraqi male prisoner

masturbating with one thumb up and another pointing to the Iraqi's genitals, accompanied by a grotesque leer, again points to the pornographic and racist nature of the prisoner abuse, as well as, in Baudrillard's view, "the pornographic face of war itself." In another shocking image, a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing atop a box has his arms stretched out and wires attached to his fingers connected to electrical lines. The hood evokes the Ku Klux Klan and their notorious lynching, while the pose of the Iraqi with his arms spread out evokes Christ on the cross, and the monstrous and grotesque figure as a whole reminds art-sensitive viewers of Goya's sketches of the horrors of war. For Baudrillard, the parody of electrocution represents "that America itself is self-electrocuted."

These pictures also elicit, as Baudrillard suggests, a brutal colonial mentality. The Washington Post noted that the cache of more than 1000 digital pictures that they had received revealed that the young American troops took pictures of camels, exotic vistas of Iraq, and scenes of ordinary people, as well as the copious prisoner abuse and disgusting prison pictures. Many of the quasi-pornographic images released of the Iraqi male prisoners depicted a feminization of them, naked or in women's undergarments, and passively humiliated and emasculated. There is, of course, a long Western colonial tradition of taking exotic pictures of faraway places and feminizing and sexualizing exotic cultures, just as there is a tradition of documenting bloody atrocity scenes in wartime. In a digital age, these genres and impulses merged together, producing a panorama of horror that may end military careers and deflate American imperial ambitions in the Middle East for a generation.

To be sure, the pornographic overtones and participation by men and women along with the gloating and smirking faces of the US prison guards made the particular Abu Ghraib prison images especially toxic and explosive. Yet any number of other images of dead Iraqi civilians, US bombing errors, brutal treatment by the US forces of Iraqis, and the like could be easily documented and distributed through the world media. Part of the shock and distress of the images in the US resulted from the sanitized view of the Iraq intervention in the US corporate media.⁹ Wars are often defined in the public mind by negative images of atrocity, such as the naked young girl fleeing in Vietnam, with her body scarred by napalm, or the image of a young US soldier lighting a peasant hut on fire with his cigarette lighter. Iraq, too, may be remembered by horrific images, in this case taken by the US troops themselves.

Baudrillard has long reflected on "the evil genius of images." He has also been a theorist of the "obscene" and the "ecstasy of communication," tracing how a media and computer society makes visible its most personal intimacies, its hidden secrets, and, as we see in the case of Iraq, its darkest deeds, thus demonstrating the saliency of his categories for critically engaging contemporary culture and history.

The events of 9/11, the "shock and awe" of the US/UK attack on Iraq, the Iraqi insurgency and violence against the occupation, the capture and trial of Saddam Hussein, and the shocking images of prisoner abuse evoke as well the category of spectacle developed by Guy Debord who was a one-time contemporary and influence upon a stage of Baudrillard's work. To conclude I want to evoke the notion of the reversal of the spectacle, developed in my own book Media Spectacle (2003) and Baudrillard's concept of "immanent reversal" to suggest the unpredictability of events and how the vicissitudes of history are marked by surprises and unintended consequences.

In the 1980s, Baudrillard posited an "immanent reversal," a flip-flop or reversed direction of meaning and effects, in which things turn into their opposite. Thus, for

Baudrillard, the society of production was passing over to simulation and seduction; the panoptic and repressive power theorized by Foucault was turning into a cynical and seductive power of the media and information society; the liberation championed in the 1960s was becoming a form of voluntary servitude; sovereignty had passed from the side of the subject to the object; and revolution and emancipation had turned into their opposites, snaring one more and more in the logic of the system, thus trapping individuals in an order of simulation and virtuality. Baudrillard's concept of "immanent reversal" thus provides a parallel to Horkheimer and Adorno's "dialectic of Enlightenment" (1972 [1947]), where key features of Western Enlightenment become their opposite. For Adorno and Horkheimer, within the transformations of organized and hi-tech capitalism, modes of Enlightenment become domination, culture becomes culture industry, democracy becomes a form of mass manipulation, and science and technology form a crucial part of an apparatus of social domination.

Yet in a media age, images and spectacle are impossible to control and a media spectacle concocted to be a triumphal display of US military power can easily reverse into a spectacle of US arrogance, brutality, and malfeasance. Thus, I would argue that the Bush administration's attempt to produce a triumphant spectacle of Iraq to help George W. Bush get re-elected and to legitimate control of Iraqi oil and economy has perhaps backfired, that such images and spectacle have eluded their control, and that Iraq now appears as a catastrophe that puts on display the limits of US power and the fallacies of the so-called "Bush doctrine" of "pre-emptive war," as well as a dramatization of the utter incompetence of the Bush administration.

Michael Moore's movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* provides an impressive response to Bush administration propaganda and shows how the spectacle can be reversed and have differing political effects. It puts on display the most grotesque elements of the Bush administration's attempts to produce a manipulative, winning political spectacle in Iraq, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* works to produce a counterspectacle that could work towards the defeat of Bush. Of course, no doubt further spectacles will emerge before the November US election and history continues to be aleatory and unpredictable.

As for the wide-spread images of Iraqi prisoner abuse that Baudrillard has engaged in recent writings, if the images display the horrors and monstrousness of US policy and can be used globally to demonstrate its abuse and torture of prisoners, and if the circulation of the spectacle of abuse and torture eventually forces the US to reverse its disastrous Iraq policies, they will prove to be examples of media images that turned symbolic victory into defeat.¹⁰ The continued circulation of a spectacle of horror in Iraq might be capable of producing considerable political outrage amongst American voters, and help turn Iraq from a triumphalist re-election spectacle, as imagined by the Bush administration, into a spectacle of American degradation and humiliation that might bring about Bush's downfall. Moreover, the widespread circulation of the Iraq horror show and the impassioned debate around the systematic Iraqi, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo prison abuse and torture scandal could mobilize public reaction that torture of prisoners is unacceptable, thus forcing governments and the military to cease and desist with actions that many people see as violations of human rights and forms of barbaric atavism. The impact and effects of media spectacles are highly unpredictable and it is possible that the distressing circulation of images of Iraqi prisoner abuse could eventually have lasting, positive effects on international law and the treatment of prisoners.

Jean Baudrillard refuses such speculation on positive outcomes of a catastrophic history and prefers to chart the parameters and vicissitudes of the foibles and disasters of the contemporary moment. His recent reflections on current events force us to look at the most shocking and disturbing aspects of the present age, to question our basic categories, modes of thought, and conventional wisdom. Always a provocateur, Baudrillard leaves me thinking in the light of the vicissitudes and catastrophes of contemporary history that T.W. Adorno was right when he wrote: “Only the exaggerations are true.”

Notes

¹ This paper was delivered at a conference marking Baudrillard's 75th birthday in Karlsruhe, Germany in July 2004 and I am grateful to participants for stimulating discussion that helped with revision. For my own views on the topics discussed in this paper, see Douglas Kellner, From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Media Spectacle (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); and “Preemptive Strikes and the War on Iraq: A Critique of Bush Administration Unilateralism and Militarism,” forthcoming in New Political Science and online at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>.

² See Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, New York: Semiotext(e): 134ff.

³ Initially, Bush spoke of a “war against terrorism” and then began expanding the concept to a “war on terror,” an obviously infinite project with no conceivable end or terminus.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, cited in Mark Goldblatt, “**French Toast. America wanted Sept. 11.**” National Review Online (December 13, 2001 8) at <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-goldblatt121301.shtml>. Goldblatt reproduces the antiFrench discourse of the right that was prevalent at the time.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “This is the Fourth World War,” an interview with Der Speigel, 2002; see the translation at <http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/spiegel.htm>.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “La violence du Mondial,” in Power Inferno (Paris: Galilee, 2002), pp. 63-83; translated into English at http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=385.

⁷ Baudrillard, The Spirit of Terrorism, p. 32.

⁸ In other words, I see democratization, rights, and justice as part of a highly contradictory and contested globalization. See Douglas Kellner, “Theorizing Globalization,” Sociological Theory, Vol. 20, Nr. 3 (November 2002): 285-305.

⁹ Parenthetically, I might note that it has been largely Arab media who have focused upon the unsavory aspects of the US Iraq invasion and occupation, showing many bloody images of Iraqi civilian victims of US military action and unflattering images of US military forces and politicians. With the Pandora’s Box of Iraqi Evils now opened, with the global media’s tendency toward pack journalism and the feeding frenzy of the moment, and with genuine fear and concerns about the direction of the Bush administration’s Iraq invasion and occupation among broad segments of the public, there are certain to be many, many more disturbing images of the growing global media spectacle of US misadventures in Iraq and outrage concerning the entire failed enterprise.

¹⁰ As I conclude these reflections in July 2004, reports are surfacing that over one hundred Iraqi children are being held in prisons, including Abu Graib, and that there are videotapes of US troops sexually abusing and torturing children that may soon be released and that journalist Seymour Hersh will continue to document the atrocities. See William Pitt, "Torturing Children," [truthout](http://www.truthout.org/print.php?sid=17066), available at www.smirkingchimp.com/print.php?sid=17066.