

Introduction

Though it has often been said that “we are now living in a post 9/11 world” this statement’s implication is not stable. Though the sentiment asserts a quantifiable change, the nature of changes referred to vary widely in meaning, even going so far as to self contradict. This contradiction is unsurprising since the truth of 9/11’s events remains contested. What did happen in New York that day can be simply described; two planes crashed into the first two towers of the World Trade Center, and later that day, both towers, as well as Building 7, collapsed at free falling rates of speed into their footprints. Their symbolization as the “absolute event” or more simply as an act of terrorism, constructed an enemy against whom there could be a violent reaction. The symbolic construction of terrorism from the events of 9/11 was a hoax, and its fiction must be properly repositioned in relationship to its reality. The deconstruction of this symbol through the interrogation of its reality is the necessary first step to avoiding participation in the subsequent fantasy of the ongoing war on terror. If what happened on September 11th 2001 remains distinct from what was symbolized, (which I argue it does) then academia should identify, as clearly as possible, the real, the symbol, the difference between the two, and what should be privileged. This paper attempts to fulfill this intellectual responsibility by first defining the conditions of the real and the role of the symbolic, and then applying this framework to the contested truth of 9/11. By examining the contradictions that exist between the facts of what happened that particular day and its various interpretations or representations, this paper hopes to enable, or at least aid, rational efforts which resist the privileging of fantasies over the reality they desire to explain. Even though it may be the case that the truth is permanently obscured, if we first acknowledge this principle we at least avoid the false and misleading

ascription of truth to our understanding of 9/11. This is desirable because the specific fantasy symbolization of 9/11 as a terrorist attack continues the plague the global geopolitical scene.

To talk about what events constituted the real of 9/11 is to identify something fundamentally distinct from the iconic referent point of 9/11 in today's world. The initial shock and awe of the strikingly spectacular severity of the event was immortalized through its media coverage. Since that media coverage was not a reality but its re-presentation, its reproduction became necessary to understanding terrorism as a "gigantic special effect" (*Spirit of Terrorism*). The horrific visual nature of those images enabled them, through repetition, to transform into the representation of terrorism. As a result of the confusion between the reality and its necessary symbolization, 9/11 was attributed the tremendous significance of the "absolute event" (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 4). I contend that Baudrillard's description of 9/11 as absolute is inaccurate because the event was not absolute in itself. It was only made such an event through the attachment of a particular symbolism. This paper will show that the events of 9/11, though real, are not terrorism. To describe them as such depends on a symbolic interpretation that prevents, or at the least hampers, our ability to identify the real of the event. To call 9/11 terrorism is to construct an enemy threat without a real reference point, while ignoring factual inconsistencies and preventing an interrogation of the event's reality. Because the move to describe 9/11 as terrorism was at its heart a political gesture made by the state through the media, it is necessary for intellectuals to challenge the claimed representation of reality. If, as Jones and Clarke argue despite public awareness of the media's bias "the specificity of the media's role in the production of a sense of radical uncertainty...remains essentially contested" then the responsibility for clarification lies with those free thinking minds who are able to publish critiques of the media from the outside, specifically academia (*Waging Terror*).

Framework

Since language is not real, but in a Lacanian sense, a *representation*, its ability to create a reality is critically questionable. If we examine Hegel's position, reaffirmed by Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Zizek, that "the word is the death of the thing" we must concede a distinct, though necessarily unclear separation between the event of the thing, and its subsequent moment of symbolization. In Lacanian terms this division is the gap between the Real and the Symbolic. Simply put, language can only signify, it cannot be the thing itself. Hegel's revelation is that our reinterpretation of the world through language is the death of the real.

This gap between the Real and the Symbolic must be internalized (philosophically) within any audience that considers itself rational. By philosophically, I refer to the action driven by the desire within the self that seeks its improvement through understanding. If we understand Derrida's philosophical gesture, relying only on rational understanding that arises from a continuing self-interrogation, then academic success is properly identifying instabilities. Understanding the particular instability of 9/11's symbolization and critically examining the rhetoric that converts events into reality first requires an awareness of things as separate from their linguistic form of representation.

Language, the Lacanian Symbolic, both converts reality into linguistic representation and is the producer of all concepts, ideologies, and fantasies. It is vital to recognize that through this conversion and production, the real, with all of its inaccessible inconsistencies is obliterated by the imposition of our linguistic framework. With the exception of live witness, there is no experience but the Symbolic's unending translation and reproduction of itself. But even in the act of witnessing, our desire for interpretation and understanding becomes a contamination of the

real. Language ultimately is capable of birthing things that have no reality beyond their symbolization, from unicorns to terrorists. This birth within the symbolic reality is Hegel's death of the thing, insofar as the participation in the symbolic imposes over reality, it obfuscates even though it claims clarity.

The Symbolic order, though productive, is always lacking reality. Since language is entirely Symbolic, the Real is everything that is left outside of language, Zizek's hard kernel notion of the real, positions it as that thing which resists symbolization, or the hole within the whole. The ultimate cause of the Symbolic's lack is the irreconcilable distance from the real. That the Symbolic order is structured around its own incompleteness is essential to understanding the paradox of why the real cannot exist, it is because it precedes its moment of symbolization. The real is the very thing that cannot be symbolized, so it lacks the terms of its own existence. The real is that thing which dies in order to allow the function of the Symbolic.

The academic description of this space, or the real beyond language, is an important first step towards articulating a politic of liberation from dependence on the symbolic for understanding. Through the conscious, rational acknowledgement that the symbolic replaces the real, intellectuals can understand fiction as fiction, and discern the fiction that has become part of the real. Through the exposure of these fantasies, communications that depend on their claim to reality for importance, (specifically media news sources) can be properly critiqued. If we identify our distance from the real but otherwise do nothing to understand it, or encourage our access to it, then we have failed to behave rationally. The war on terror has become only one of a plethora of examples which demonstrates the risk inherent in our irrational pursuit of the symbolic.

Because the symbolic order is incomplete it drives our desire for fantasy, or for that which hides the lack in the Symbolic. If we are not aware of this lack philosophically then we seek fulfillment from within the Symbolic, Lacan's objet petit *a*, or the object of fantasy. Fantasy is the necessary precursor to ideology, which serves as the glue that holds the symbolic order together; it is ideology that makes the random or incoherent sensible. This linguistic confusion that is masked by the symbolization of ideology is not limited to the ideology of terrorism. Though it is less common now, many people still deny the existence of global warming. Global warming is another example of the symbolizing of the real as a means of obfuscating potential contradictions. To say 'I don't believe in global warming' is to imply that the ideology espoused by some scientists asserts a different symbolization of the reality contained within atmospheric data, the statement doesn't deny the sign but the signified. The disbelief is only rational if we assume that their words do not have a fixed reference (i.e. the globe is warming), but an unstable one (this is what is causing the globe to warm). This example shows how we know that words mean more than what they signify, but the lack of clarity in that signification is masked by the fantasy of a coherent Symbolic. This fantasy of coherence encourages our tendency to blame any erratic weather behavior on the fantasy of global warming.

The same construction occurs with terrorism. One can say I don't believe in 9/11, meaning they reject the contradictory interpretations that are contained within the phrase. This is not to dispute the existence of the day itself, or even events that occurred that day but to challenge to seeming cohesion of the symbolism of that day. This paper does not believe in the

idea '9/11 was a terrorist attack' because it is precisely through this gesture to understand the event through its symbolization that we destroy the reality of its reference.

The fantasies that are hardest to let go are the ones that we want to believe are true. But the truth is that most of what we know is pure fantasy. There is no direct connection to sources of information in a globalized world. What we think we know is completely detached from the truth of its being. We are all aware of the media bias, spin and sensationalism, but we still depend on the currency of its events to sustain our illusion of awareness. If we are to consider ourselves rational intellectuals, we must then recognize the necessary distinction between the event and its death through symbolization.

The dissemination of these fantasies would not be possible without language, obviously, but to overlook the media's subversion of language with fantasy would be foolish. Critical self examination is the task Badiou demands of philosophy. The fantasy that the masses have been deluded into believing is contingent on the people's belief in the symbolic order. The media's essential role in transforming the act of planes crashing into buildings into 'act of terrorism' or 'an attack against freedom' must be clearly denounced as a fantasy construction. To accept the symbolic order's representation as a truth in itself condemns rational thought, and blindly encourages the pursuit of fantasy. The war on terror cannot be won; there are no conditions for its victory, which is precisely why the fantasy is self-sustaining if one concedes to its logic. We must relegate the symbolic to its proper place, and criticize the mechanism that transforms the real into the symbolic, in this case the media. By removing the fantasy that encourages war against its imagined enemies, philosophy will be enabled to affect change.

Scholarly Interpretation

To describe the symbolization of the real as a death is worth consideration, for it is literally a death through distortion, a permanent displacement, or misplacement of reality. But in that death of the real, there is also the simultaneous birth of the symbolic. Academia is not completely unaware of this troublesome paradox and several scholars have begun the challenging work of criticizing media's more egregious fantasy productions. Jean Baudrillard made a brilliant argument for the non-reality of the first Gulf War by critically analyzing the media's crucially important role in RE-presenting events. He declared that the version of the war seen by Americans at home was a fiction and the televised version of the Gulf War did not happen. Ironically, the obvious truth of this argument was not immediately accepted. Clearly, the representation on television was not the war in its totality, nor was it demonstrative of the war itself. Indeed, to conceive of the possibility of a televised war was essentially a claim to be able to symbolize its reality. But the necessary act of conversion (via editing) to make the reality of war into something that would be palatable, reveals the true desire of such media is an attempt to uphold the fantastical ideology which justified the war. Baudrillard's logic here is exactly aligned with this project in that by drawing attention to the distortion of the real, or asserting its lack, he forces us to reevaluate our relationship to information sources. By denying the Symbolic's assertion of coherence, in the act of articulating its non reality, a new space was opened where the fiction of the TV war could be relegated to its proper place.

The same non-reality can be ascribed to the version of 9/11 that many of us experienced through our television sets. The vision of the event was then framed, cinematically, like an echo of the disaster movies, with "frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant

cloud of dust from the collapsing tower” (*Welcome to the Desert* 11). The planes themselves hitting the towers, erupting into balls of fire was in itself a spectacular visual effect. The intensified silence of the suicide planes refused to provide its own explanation. The confusion of this gesture made it more terrifying when even the media was unable to understand what they were reporting. When they were unable to symbolize the event they could only replay the drama of the visual effect, its horrific nature simply made it more compelling video footage. The media was itself a bystander, echoed across the air was the confusion of the real. That which resisted symbolization was described by newscasters with the classic ‘we aren’t sure what’s happening, but we will let you know as soon as we find out more.’ Of course this is ironic, because all that was left to find out was how the real would be symbolized. We all saw what happened in New York that day. Two planes hit two towers, and later that day both towers collapsed into their own footprints. There was an obvious editing of relevant information from the moment the symbolic ascription of terrorism began to intrude. Though eye witness testimonies of secondary explosions were initially given air time, like fall of WTC building 7, their incompatibility with the symbolic terror of the planes as the instrument made such contradictory details irrelevant. Even Baudrillard asserted that the towers unexpected collapse seemed to be an act of complicity with the suicidal pilots, which demonstrates how interpretation can transpose over the reality. Though there remain several facts which suggest explosives played a role in the tower’s collapse, including visual evidence, seismic evidence, eye witness testimony, and explosive particulate matter in debris samples, because these facts are contrary to the symbolization of terrorism and less immediately visually obvious they were literally a part of the real that had to be obfuscated by the symbol. The power of this symbolic creation ultimately concluded in the president’s

declaration of a “terrorist who hates our freedom” transforming a terrifying event into the political act of terrorism.

To examine the belief that September 11 was a life changing event we can consider it like Badiou's French Revolution. Both day's events have all the characteristics of the never before seen truths that once collectively named mark a changed world state, an order that undeniably exists. But Zizek was one who said 9/11 changed nothing; it proved the internal contradictions of capitalism would generate an enemy from within itself, an enemy whose existence is dependent on the thing itself and consequently cannot be destroyed by its own provider. Zizek's conclusion in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* is to point out the false choice created by the fantasy between "liberal democracy and totalitarianism." The 'us vs. them' dichotomy fails when both parties are symptoms of the same fantasy, global capitalism. Smith usefully summarizes Zizek's conclusion,

“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. [Smith -2].

The war on terrorism is a more blatant demonstration of American imperialism, (re)presented by the media. On September 11th the media proved its function to be an echo of the voice of government. Terrorism rises out of the symbolic, critically dependent on language to sustain its identity, and who better to provide that language than the media. The construction of 'terrorism' was a concept capable of creating the crippling fear that allowed seemingly rational

people to give up their rights. To critically examine the role of the media in creating fantasy, one must examine the fantasy itself, recognizing its elements in language, desire, and its necessary separation from the real.

Baudrillard's book, *Simulacra and Simulations*, is a critique of the American capitalist fantasy in which he explains the threat to rational thought is a direct result of the ceaseless reproduction of desire within the simulacrum. The simulacrum can be understood here as the symbolic, the thing created by the death of the real. But the simulacrum is a specifically corrupted symbolic, in its ability to distort reality. By creating its own hyper-real, like so many bad MTV reality shows we are presented with fantasy as 'the real world'. One of the better re-interpretations of Baudrillard's text is the 1999 blockbuster, *The Matrix*. Before the sequels ruined the philosophical underpinnings of the storyline, the original film imagines a world in which the power of the simulacrum is complete. In the movie all material reality is actually a virtual reality produced by a giant machine to which everyone is attached. The real world is completely estranged from the symbolic, the matrix in this instance, and we see the inherent danger of desire in the simulacrum played out perfectly by Cypher, the traitor, who knowingly desires to return to the unreality of the Matrix. The parallel here is quite simple. The media functionally has the same role as the matrix; it converts the undesirable 'desert of the real' into symbolic coinage. The media does not exist as a thing in itself, but as a means of perpetuating the desire for itself. The difference between the event and its coverage is a gap that cannot be reconciled. So the true function of the media is not to replicate the real but (re)present it in a way that is desirable. The media relies upon its audience's desire; it creates a subject that its audience is interested in and then presents the facts that support it. The media merely confirms what we want to be true through its self-referential opinion polls, appeals to common sense, and societal

standards. It's either true because we believe it, or we want to believe it so it's true. In short, Baudrillard's book and the argument of the Matrix are identical, wake up and realize that the same people who manipulate our reality by converting events into news stories are stealing their power from the individuals who buy into their symbolic order. The media is the Matrix; both delude us by divorcing the real from its representation, by privileging the sign to the thing signified they make us all vulnerable to the plague of fantasies.

What made the 9/11 attacks specifically susceptible to their conversion into fantasy was our unconscious desire for the attack. If the fantasy promoted by the American capitalist ideology is a dream of prosperity and freedom from want then this desire must necessarily be permanently unfulfilled. Since the satisfaction of desire would be incompatible with capitalism the rational realization of this truth simultaneously creates the desire for its collapse. The desire for the collapse of the fantasy is an ever-present anxiety in American culture. Capitalism must necessarily re-appropriate this desire in order to survive, and indeed it has. Zizek also cites the Matrix as evidence of Hollywood's manipulation of this anxiety by placing the hero in a sanitized meaningless system, coupled with destructive sequences, and the loss of happiness. The desire for this particularly fantastical storyline can only be explained by understanding our internal desire for a recognition and collapse of the meaningless symbolic order. But when capitalism co-opts its own site of resistance by making its symbolic representation of this collapse entertaining, it delays the recognition of the real in favor of the symbolic. But when the distance between fictional collapse and the real collapse are eliminated, as occurred on 9/11, academics are given a new opportunity to reveal the mechanisms through which fantasies are promoted.

The media's transforming construction of the symbolic cannot be understated. Media relies on the symbolic completely; its function is not to introduce but to interpret. It is the media who is the ultimate producer of fantasy, the stories that make sense from raw image data. Badiou's critique of globalized communication is that it occurs in a disrupted, fragmented and incoherent form. The real problem with communication and reliance on media for information is the inherent distortion of events. We all know the media has bias, but we consume the media precisely because of this bias. Media re-affirms fantasy; participation in the symbolic requires an understanding of its constructions. As Zizek argues there is no objective view of history,

“the allegedly ‘objective,’ impartial gaze is not neutral, but rather is the particular gaze of the winners, of the ruling classes” [Zizek -4].

There are no facts that explain themselves; they depend on the symbolic order to sustain their meaning. This is dangerous because we now live in a world where we rely on the media to disseminate the fantasies we desire.

“The ubiquity of the media has enabled it to pass beyond a certain point of inflexion: where once was the image of the event is now the event of the image: “in earlier times an event was something that happened—now it is something that is designed to happen. It occurs, therefore, as a virtual artifact, as a reflection of pre-existing media-defined forms” (Baudrillard, 1993: p. 41). An implacable belief in the image as fixed, participative copy engenders a belief in, and thus effects derived from, the image itself. This adds confusion to contradiction. It enables, through the transposition of image into event, the creation of the image as currency, with desire as its coinage. The more spectacular the image—which, as every horror director knows, frequently means the more abhorrent and fearful—the more it is desired; and the more desired, the more valuable” [Jones et al -1].

The reversal of event and image is crucial. The media privileges their ability to construct events by generating images. But this reversal of order allows the media to selectively determine which images have meaning. The events without images lose

meaning, if it's not covered or seen on the news, it functionally doesn't exist. The portrayal of images has been separated from their existence. It doesn't matter what happened in the world, what matters is the fantastical world vision we have seen in the media. This makes the spectacle of terrorism all the more potent coinage.

“Terrorism's perversity—and we include its media coverage, without which it ceases to be terrorism—is that as it becomes ever more acutely aware of the currency of its actions, ever more aware of the proportionate relationship between its relative horror and its image-based affects, it also increasingly plays into the hands of those who mistakenly write it off as beyond reckoning...This perversity does not make the putative state of affairs (Good vs. Evil) any more truthful, however; it is more a reflection upon a West that has dealt all the (political) cards to itself (Baudrillard, 2002c), forcing anything or anyone outside into utilising the only weapon remaining: the (apolitical) spectacle” [Jones et al -1].

Jones' argument, which draws extensively from Baudrillard and others, is that the media plays a critical role in creating and promoting fantasy. The ‘geopolitics of the real’ have become so obscured by the rhetoric of the West that we must break from the “disjunct of two nihilisms” and acknowledge the fantasy in our midst.

“There is no possible distinction, at the level of images and information, between the spectacular and the symbolic, no possible distinction between the ‘crime’ and the crackdown. (Baudrillard, 2002c: p. 31) [Jones et al -1].

The opposition is no easy meat. The extent to which these fantasies have been promoted and accepted is enormous. The state of world politics is one openly engaged in conflict, more secretly understood to be in conflict with itself. The climate of fear has made the American population gullible, we desire the truth of the fantasy and so we have made it functionally so. Terrorists exist, and we are fighting them. Ignorant of our role as perpetrators we declare war on a symptom of global capitalism and fight fire with fire.

“the inexorable result of a triumphalist globalisation battling to maintain the illusion of its own morality. Political misinformation and media complicity both

derive from a concerted effort to maintain this illusion. Crucially, this is an illusion that both provokes and is maintained by desire” [Jones et al -1].

As Žižek argues we must avoid the false choice between Bush and Bin Laden. There is no difference between the types of violence promoted by either. They are two versions of the same fantasy, both enact violence, both claim morality. The only moral choice is an opposition to the violence of globalization. We must acknowledge the fantasy in our midst, the terrorist, to be a media construction that encourages violence for its own sake, and we must reject that.

Fictional Interpretation

How do we understand 9/11? Delivered first through the media, in both senses of *currency*, it is a representation first and foremost is demonstrative of the power of value in *real news*. Its relevance as an event cannot be denied or ignored because it is the intrusion of the reality of what was designated as fiction. To represent it as news first requires the (perhaps unconscious) confrontation with the fantasy, even if it is only so that we can dismiss the presence of fantasy by the affirmation of the symbolic. It was an event that had to be witnessed, over and over again, to establish the reality of its occurrence. The broken record sense of its visual repetition was necessary to its repositioning it back into the symbolic. When witnessed in a movie the drama of the effect happens in real time, once, in order to maintain its proper relation to the inevitable conclusion. But in its disruptive departure from fiction, in its intrusion into our space of reality we had to have the event be visually repeated in order to deny an integration that would enable a conclusion. Precisely because it exposed the ever present illusion of the media by its transfiguration into reality it had to be reconstructed symbolically or it would threaten the existence of all symbols.

Because it is a fantasy, like all stories or creations we attempt to understand it through the application of language as an assertion of our position of mastery. When we ascribe intention to void we posit a truth against the meaningless nature of the suicidal gesture. By ascribing the word terrorism to the real of 9/11 we simultaneously construct a threat and impose a limitation against the infinite terror of the unexplained. The true threat of the act, the terror of the day was the unreality of the moment. Captured in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) we have the horror of the un-named, fear for the act that cannot be rationalized, because it resists our attempt to

impose sense on the world. But out of fear of reality we demand the construction, and sustained belief in our fantasy which preserves our sense of mastery.

Animal's People

In the novel *Animal's People*(2008), Indra Sinha uses the outside perspective of his narrator, a poor crippled Indian boy, to present surprisingly deep insight on the reality of 9/11.

“The big thing happened in (America), when I saw it on the tele do you know what I did? I clapped! I thought, fantastic! This plane comes out of nowhere, flies badoom! Into this building. Pow! Blam! Flowers of flame! ... I'm going “Fucking brilliant! Bollywallah special effects, forget it!” Zafar looks at me and says, “You fucking idiot, Animal, this isn't a movie. This really happened. It's a terrible accident that just happened.” ... “Wasn't an accident,” chips in someone. “The plane didn't even try to miss.” The tele is going crazy, playing the crash over and over again. Commentators are shouting. No one knows what's happening. ... Me, I don't believe its real. It's a hoax, clip from a movie trailer... “In (America) bombs, explosions, buildings falling, such things are normal. I'm tellin you, see *Fight Club*.” ...Even after the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth planes hit and all those buildings fall, Zafar maintains it is not a movie. Zafar has to be wrong. Stuff like that doesn't happen in real life. Not in (America) anyway.”
(*Animal' People* 60)

The narrator first expresses delight, he sees the special effect, the image doesn't seem real. Zafar literally has to declare the reality, “this really happened” and immediately the problematic moment of symbolization intrudes with, “it's a terrible accident” and finally the symbolic presents its own contradiction with the declaration it “wasn't an accident.” The simplicity of the dialogue reveals a much stronger desire, the desire to understand, to make sense out of the real. Animal is called idiot because he doesn't see the symbol, he literally only sees the effect. The novel captures the moment when the television did go crazy, through its confusion of the real and the symbol. Animal sees a new building fall each time, because “In America, bombs, explosions, buildings falling, such things are normal...see *Fight Club*.” We had imagined the act

to disguise our desire for its reality, and faced with the overwhelming implication of its fulfillment we had to hide from its confrontation by symbolizing it a terrorist attack. Animal gives us the least biased perspective, because he doesn't ascribe intention, instead he attempts to place the data alongside its other examples. He sees that through the illusion of Hollywood what's normal also doesn't happen in real life, or at least no in America. The novel accurately uses this perspective, which resists the symbolization of itself, insofar as it bears witness to other symbolizations. It is through the critical awareness of the symbolic's inevitable distortion, that academics can preserve the constant interrogation of the real. Animal's insistence on disbelief is the critical one, "I don't believe it's real." Such a denial is carefully not a denial of event, but of symbolization. The hoax is revealed when the movie trailer like clip of a 'real' building's destruction is used to justify a war on terror. The ultimate symbolization occurs as soon as the incoherent and suicidal gesture is transformed into an attack. Because the gesture did not reveal a weakness, but provide a justification for strength it demonstrates the fulfillment of the desire for mastery that is satisfied through symbolization at the death of the real.

WHITE NOISE

Don DeLillo's fictional novels *White Noise* (1985) and *Falling Man* (2007) both address this tension inherent in representation that demonstrates the fear within the symbolic. *White Noise* is brilliantly perceptive in that it imagines a world (pre 9/11 of course) threatened by the "airborne toxic event" a spectre which conjures terror amongst the civil population precisely through its deadly uncertainty. Forced to evacuate their homes, they flee in the middle of the night, ironically they blindly drive towards the cloud and in a haunting moment the novel's unlikely protagonist Jack is exposed. His attempt to confront his terrifying fear of death drives

the remainder of the novel, as it forces him to realize that it is uncertainty which is the true cause of his fear.

The novel has critical relevance in so far as it critiques the precise way in which the representation of danger has primary significance to the terrorized populace. Prior to the airborne event, in a typical DeLillo style tangential story about a plane crash he captures what is at stake in the performance of a near death narrative. The narrator of this side story identifies the critical change amongst the passengers of the crashing plane when the instructions are circulated to prepare for a crash landing instead of a crash. Identifying that,

“the difference between the two is only one word. Didn’t this suggest that the two forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? ... The basic difference ... seemed to be that you could sensibly prepare for a crash landing ... they saw how easy it was, by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in consciousness if not in actual fact.” (*White Noise* 91)

This is a crucial realization insofar as it brings our awareness to the fact that through symbolizing the event linguistically the real terror of the crash is somehow, magically altered. DeLillo aptly foreshadows the importance of “airborne toxic event” is terrifying in its resistance to such an interpretation. The concluding lines of this tangential story raises another interesting, and incredibly relevant point. The plane recovers as mysteriously as it malfunctioned and at the narrator’s conclusion, which was delivered to the crowd of passengers lingering around the gate to relive their moment of terror while safely back on the ground, one observer is keenly aware of the need for representation.

“Where’s the media?” she said.
 “There is no media in Iron City.”
 “They went through all that for nothing?” (*White Noise* 92)

By drawing attention to the idea that it is the necessary function of the media to establish such events as significant after the fact, DeLillo suggests the real terror of the event is inherently

subordinate to the power of its symbolic representation. Without being reproduced as a story demonstrating a moment of terror, the event loses all importance beyond its temporal existence. The plane has landed, and the passengers will disperse, without the media there is no representation, the particular fails to bear weight without its own symbolic.

The main event in the *White Noise* happens in part two titled “the airborne toxic event.” Right away what the event is named is continuously changing, revealing the instability of its symbolic representation as the secret of its terror. First described on the radio as a “feathery plume” (111) then as a “black billowing cloud” (113) then “the airborne toxic event” (117) and finally no longer on the radio but blared from the loudspeaker of a fire captain’s car it appears as a “cloud of deadly chemicals” (119). DeLillo uses this moment in the novel to play with the media’s false representations for after each retelling of the radio report by his son (in a clever emphasizing of the number of steps removed) there comes a denial or reclarification. First, “it’s not a plume” (112) and after hearing it called the black billowing cloud Jack replies, “that’s a little more accurate, which means they’re coming to grips with the thing” (113) and later “it mean they’re looking the thing...squarely in the eye. They’re on top of the situation” (115) both statements are of course highly ironic, the cloud being an insubstantial “ungrippable” thing which by no means are ‘they’ in control of. The presentation of the airborne toxic event comes with the caveat “he spoke these words in a clipped and foreboding manner, syllable by syllable as if he sensed the threat in state-created terminology” (117). Jack’s recognition of his son’s repetition of language is presented in a way that forces the audience to interrogate the act of naming, and its significant contribution to terror. Jack’s final denial is even half hearted “These things are not important. The important thing is location. It’s there we’re here” (117). The final attempt at denial is the false imposition of a distance, which collapses frightening speed. Just as

9/11 broke down the imaginary distance from tragedy that we thought our privilege ensured for us, Jack quickly swallows his words “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes” and ends up fleeing with the rest of the town. (117).

As Jack struggles to make sense of his fear resulting from the unknown affects of the chemical poisoning he was exposed to, his son, Heinrich, counterbalances his attempt to find objective representation. Despite Jack being the college professor, it is his son who articulate the the novel’s strongest argument towards the instability of representation “the whole point of Sir Albert Einstein...is how can the sun be up if you’re standing on the sun...he was just saying ‘if.’ Basically there is no up or down, hot or cold, day or night...hot and cold are just words. Think of them as words. We have to use words. We can’t just grunt” (233). Of course, DeLillo ironically follows Heinrich’s exposition with “a long pause. No one spoke. We went back to eating for as long as it took to bite off and chew a single mouthful of food” (233).

If *White Noise* captures the anxiety we have towards how an terrifying event resists symbolization, then the uncertain nature of the symbol of the 9/11 attack heightens the significance of its ultimate interpretation. The war for control over the meaning of 9/11 as a symbol continues to be one of the primary illusions in our society today. Precisely because its divisive effect could have been imagined by the perpetrators of terror 9/11 demonstrates most profoundly the constant presence of the rupture between the Real and Symbolic in our understanding. Ignoring it is the same glossing over we do out of necessity to arrive at any understanding, it is the reduction of the particular to the linguistic, the death of the real. If this is always continuously occurring you might ask why it is then necessary to go any further in this analysis, why peer any further into the void? It is precisely because we seek to illuminate other

parts of the world that we must come to understand the dark. For the light we bring, or our intellectual understanding of the world, is only meaningful to us after we have internalized the existence of the dark. It is this failure of understanding that pushes against our desire for rationality. The promise of an orderly world is a promise to incorporate a fantastical understanding of the reality of an act of terrorism. The logical contradiction lies in the necessary construction of a fearful unknown, combined with a real other, presumably defeatable because they are real. But the moment you see the real within the terrorist, it loses its power to terrify because it has been reduced from its infinite malleability to a concrete particular. In order to get revenge it was necessary to identify a target, and this identification is especially problematic when then act itself (9/11) resists its own identification.

FALLING MAN

Falling Man (2007) is a novel that fictionalizes a family's reaction to 9/11. It walks its audience through multiple different, but necessary translations, of 9/11, from eyewitness survivors, to their families, to people throughout the town. DeLillo uses his fiction to challenge our perspective by repeatedly deconstructing the audience's meanings by making us aware of their dependence on perspective. The novel's perspective varies widely, with no direct indication of perspective shift. Each chapter contains multiple different voices, speaking out from an almost completely disembodied perspective these voices emphasize that they are only coherent to themselves, the audience is alienated from the text, struggling to put the pieces together.

DeLillo's novel makes the falling towers and the falling man his iconic symbols throughout the novel. The book opens and closes with the same moment, Keith, one of the novel's main characters who was in the WTC when it was struck, in the streets fleeing the collapsing

towers. In the opening sentence we have the towers present only in their absence, “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.” The transformative essence of 9/11 is immediately present; we have gone from “a street”, a limited concrete sign, to “a world”, with infinitely variable “time and space”, and the unspecified time of “near night” (*Falling Man* 3). This opening right away affirms the idea “9/11 changed the world” but DeLillo’s investigation is anything but simplistic. The significance of the extent of this transformation is what is explored for the rest of the novel. There is no longer stability within the family, allegorical for the nation, as each person uniquely encodes the event of terrorism to fit into their life. *Falling Man* explicitly challenges the meaning that is produced as part of our continual process to make sense of the world.

The repetition of imagery at the opening and the closing of the novel suggest the failure of the human attempt to provide significance. The setting is one of devastation, the clouds of dust, injured people, scattered debris, but in both scenes the image which connects through to the theme of the rest of the novel is a falling shirt. First described as,

“There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river” (4).

It is this very image that ends the novel,

“Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (246).

In both moments the scene is the same, Keith is walking away from the tower, his eyes full with the horror of the moment, and he is suddenly witness to something that stands outside the image. The shirt, flapping in the wind, is the hollow shape of a falling man. By denying its placement within the world, by making it an ‘other worldly symbol’ it somehow makes us aware that it

stands in the place of person. Just as the “falling man” of the novel is a street artist who dresses in a business suit and stages public leaps where he hangs suspended from a wire upside down, his frozen, falling body mimicking and simultaneously mocking the real presence of the image, so too does the shirt echo the falling man. The hollow symbol, literally the shirt, but figuratively it is of course the towers themselves, “is something else, outside,...like nothing in this life.” DeLillo frames his novel with this reminder that the construction of symbol is the death of the real. It is outside, it is not life, it is interpretation, and it is empty and hollow of everything except the significance which we impose on it.

The imposition of meaning from perspective echoes as a theme throughout the rest of the novel. In a still life painting with several objects there is an anxious moment where the perspective of artistic interpretation produces the fantasy itself.

“boxes and biscuit tins...a long necked bottle...two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.
 “What do you see?” he said.
 She saw what he saw. She saw the towers (49).

The objects are unnamable, which seems to encourage the desire for them to be interpreted. Just as people searched through the photographs of the smoking towers and found the devil’s face, the haunting image of the towers appears in the obscurity of other art. This is not so strange, considering that there were plenty of artistic representations that echo acts of terror, but in this instance the painting is a still life, and the objects tell us there is no connection here to the towers. So why then does DeLillo have the towers appear? It is because their symbolic stature was created through the trauma of their refusal to remain artistic. It was not inconceivable by any means to imagine that those building might collapse. In the year 2000, the cover of FEMA’s planning report depicted

the WTC towers painted with a red bull's eye. Movies like *Die Hard*, *Fight Club*, *the Matrix*, and countless others used the same visual imagery of collapsing buildings as thrilling entertainment. But DeLillo uses this moment to suggest that the breach from fantasy to reality is bidirectional. If the fantasy of collapse became reality on 9/11, then in a post 9/11 world the conversion works back, turning the tower's reality back into the symbolic. The revelation here is that it is from our desire to preserve the fantasy idea of the towers collapsing that we recreate their presence within the symbolic, hence their reappearance in the form of the "unnamable dark object."

DeLillo's novel seems critically aware of Baudrillard and Zizek's argument that inherent within the symbolism of the tower was the (unconscious) fantastical desire for their collapse. The exact fantasy Baudrillard articulates is a desire for the failure of the hegemonic power. This secret, but universal desire for resistance against the dominant superpower takes the form of aversion to the symbol of omnipotence which the towers stood for.

"We can say they did it but we wished for it. If this is not taken into account, the event loses any symbolic dimension. It becomes a pure accident, a purely arbitrary act...Without this deep-seated complicity, the event would not have had the resonance it has...even those who share in the advantages of that [global] order have this malicious desire in their hearts. Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is – happily- universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinning, of that definitive order...The increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it...when the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide planes with their own suicides...The West, in the position of God, (divine omnipotence and moral legitimacy) has become suicidal and declared war on itself. The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 5-7)

Keith's argument in *Falling Man* seems an echo of Baudrillard's sentiment,

"But that's why we built the towers, isn't it? Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of

destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious what other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, here it is bring it down (*Falling Man* 116).

That DeLillo refers specifically to the act of doubling captures Baudrillard's sense of universal resistance to the claim of omnipotence. A single tower, regardless of its height does not possess the symbolic import that two towers claim. But the replication of demonstrations of power does seem to suggest infallibility; it was a gesture that was purely superfluous except in its necessary role in the construction of the symbolic.

The Truth of 9/11

What constitutes the truth of 9/11 is contested on multiple levels. Its linguistic designation as a terrorist attack implies an outside enemy, but in its most controversial interpretation 9/11 has been considered an inside job. Though conspiracy theories are equally guilty of attempting to symbolize reality from a presumed position of mastery, the arguments raised by these theorists make any claim about 9/11's truth suspect. The number of inconsistencies range from the government's response (or more precisely failure to respond), the unexpected "success" of the attack in causing the total collapse the towers, the suspicious circumstances surrounding the collapse of WTC Tower #7 and the contested crash sites at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania have all proved difficult facts to reconcile with the symbolic fantasy. In an attempt to reconcile the potentially conflicting interpretation the 9/11 Commission Report was called for. But despite the release of the 9/11 Commission Report, several experts including scientists, scholars, architects, physicists, and engineers, in addition to concerned citizens, filmmakers, journalists, and other eye witnesses, have continued to publish material which only raises the number of inconsistencies and irresolvable discrepancies within the official report. Documentaries like *Loose Change 9/11*, *Terrorstorm*, and *In Plane Sight* raise serious questions unresolved by the official report, presenting seismic, chemical and visual evidence for the demolition of all three WTC towers, to visual proof of tampering with the footage of the plane impacts. These theories should not be considered as necessarily more real, they are equally guilty of symbolizing the real, but neither should their presence be excluded from a discussion of the real. One of the fictions of 9/11 is the assumption that it gives us enough information to understand its reality. Unfortunately, like the steel beams from the towers that were recycled without being chemically tested for explosives, we cannot return to examine the reality of that

day without looking through the lenses of our fantasy. But through the sustained interrogation of that reality we can at least discern which “truths” are fantasies.

Obviously how 9/11 would ultimately be interpreted was, and is of great historic importance. John Farmer, one of the members of the 9/11 Commission report, in his book *Ground Truth* attempted to resolve some of the inconsistencies which he thought remained despite the publication of the report. His attempt to provide the public with working truths to build on in a post 9/11 world reveals the tension that still remains with the symbolization of the event. In his conclusion, he makes several crucial observations. First that,

“History should record that whether through unprecedented administrative incompetence or orchestrated mendacity, the American people were misled about the nation’s response to the 9/11 attacks.” (*Ground Truth* 289)

Farmer’s analysis utilized the timelines of information received by the various people within a host of different government agencies, and then released to the public, working through the years, months, days, and finally hours and minutes of the 9/11 attacks. His representation meets the academic frameworks requirement in so far as it focuses on the data prior to its symbolization. His awareness of the symbolic import the data contains makes him sensitive to the affect of symbolizing it; he resists making it coherent but instead reveals its own inconsistencies. His analysis is therefore beneficial in how it reveals our distance from the real, our susceptibility to attempting to interpret it, and the important influences to recognize in our effort to discern the fiction in our reality. Farmer concludes

“We may never know now the true “story of the story.” But it is impossible to conclude honestly, from the two Inspector General Reports, that the official version of the events of 9/11 was the result of mere administrative incompetence; too many questions remain unanswered.” (*Ground Truth* 288)

Especially because Farmer acknowledges our distance from the truth of the event, he is more easily able to identify the specific lies that we have been sold. He says of the *9/11*

Commission Report,

“The account of 9/11 had been prepared not just for the commission; it had been prepared for Congress, the media, the general public... Neither report takes note of the central consideration in any evaluation of credibility: Did the “inaccurate” story serve anyone’s interest? If so, it is more likely to have been deliberate. There is no question that the official version of the events that emerged in the weeks and months after 9/11 served the interest of every institution involved: the FAA was able to avoid disclosing that it failed to provide notice on United 93 for nearly thirty minutes, and that the notice it did provide came after the plane crashed; the military were able to avoid acknowledging that it scrambled the Langley fighters based on mistaken information, that it had never followed United 93 on its radarscopes, that it never received the shoot-down authorization from the president until United 93 had crashed, and that it never passed that authorization to the pilots; the White House was able to avoid disclosing the fact that it was, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant to the national defense during that critical period on 9/11.”
(*Ground Truth* 287)

Farmer’s critique of the report’s failure to provide truth is part of his larger critique of governmental incompetence. He identifies the reason for this specific lie’s perpetuation as the failure of government to acknowledge their inability to confront the truth. The government’s dependence on its ability to create fantasy directly inhibits the public’s accessibility to truth. The government lied according to Farmer to provide us with false assurance. But that’s problematic because,

“That false assurance masked the fundamental disconnects that existed that day: between and among agencies; between the bureaucracy within agencies and the agencies’ departmental leadership; and also between the different agencies and the national leadership. This book has shown that those fundamental disconnects had existed throughout the five year struggle against al Queda, and had beset virtually every agency of government charged with

adapting to the new threat: the FBI; The CIA; the State Department; The Department of Defense; the Department of Transportation. In each case, agencies were able to identify the threat but were thoroughly incapable of changing the way they were configured, in order to respond to it. Emblematic of these failures is the ultimate Whiskey Tango Foxtrot moment to emerge from the 9/11 Commission's investigation: the image of former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger hiding documents in his socks, so desperate to prevent the public from seeing certain papers that he sneaked out of the National Archives and hid the documents at a nearby construction site so that he could shred them later. The desire to inhibit the discovery of historical truth, it turns out, is truly bipartisan, and – as the revelation that the CIA destroyed the tapes of its interrogation of detainees reveals- is not limited by government agency, it is endemic to the modern way of government." (*Ground Truth* 289-290)

Our failure to recognize Farmer's truth of 9/11 is a failure to respond to the reality of the threat. Farmer convincingly reveals that the threat of terror is not in the attack itself, but in the weakness it exposes in our governmental response. Our inability to come to grips with the reality of the attack encouraged a fantastical solution. Farmer focuses on the internal domestic challenges that poses, rather than the theoretical or geopolitical implications, but his analysis is nevertheless relevant for it reveals the danger of distorting the truth.

“More important, in my view, the administration's unwillingness to acknowledge the truth prevented it from seeing the implications of that truth: that what failed in both the 9/11 and Katrina responses was not a discrete agency or two, or a cabinet head, or a given bureaucracy, but government itself. We never undertook the kind of searching reexamination of government that the true history of 9/11 would have indicated; it was all too easy, once the false but reassuring story was told, to ascribe the faltering response to the unexpected nature of the attack, and to respond by simply creating a new department, more layers of bureaucracy, solving yesterday's problem at the expense of preventing tomorrow's." (*Ground Truth* 317)

Our false story has been reassuring, we have identified an enemy and gone to war against them, but we remain vulnerable precisely because we did not re-examine government using a true history of 9/11. Farmer helps this intellectual project through his clarification

of the distance we created from the real. He remains critical of the effect of symbolization, or false reassurance, and he reminds us of the ongoing problems that will arise from this confusion if it remains unaddressed.

Conclusion

The importance of recognizing the difference between the real and symbolic arises from our ability to challenge those communications that dissolve the distinction as a means to seize and control the inherent power of interpretation. Specifically, the government-sponsored media depends upon its ability to convert real events into symbolic currency, wasted in the endless pursuit of fantastical desires. When the skies are seeded with terror, it is the task of rational people to divorce reality from the real, to imagine the event prior to its symbolization, to interrogate the real of its being. Today, over eight years after the event 9/11, is still as critical a time to deconstruct the symbol as ever. Baudrillard's 'absolute event' indicates that by the power of 9/11's symbolization as terrorism we have been brought into a new age of warfare where our enemy is not distinct, but all the more powerfully imagined. The power of state discourse to construct and control identity through a politic of fear and manipulation of public opinion cannot be ignored. To traverse the fantasy of this event, as Žižek argues, and I agree, we need to "recognize the part of fiction in 'real' reality...we should discern which part of reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode" (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 19). To recognize the fiction of 9/11 is to divorce the symbol, and its spectacular fiction from the real. If we 9/11 was not an act of terrorism in itself, but only capable of becoming such an act through symbolization, it is important we examine the form of the media which allows for such a symbolization. It is with

this sense of the world that academics must operate to be rational. Without discerning the role of the Symbolic we persist in the fantastical pursuit of enemies in the production of nothing more than spectacle.

In many ways 9/11's relevance, and thereby the power of its reference remains contingent on its perpetual immediacy within our lives. Ironically, the constant in state of emergency is the perpetual existence of threats. That 9/11 led to the establishment of the Homeland Security Department, and the new visibility of a Threat Level Advisory System in permanently elevated state, proves that the threat of terrorism is symbolic and not real. In truth the higher the threat level, the more power is given to the government, and the difference between the crime and the crackdown becomes indistinguishable. This is the irrational behavior that intellectuals must avoid. True terror is abstract, it is that which defies expectation, and its success is measured in its production of confusion, the perpetuation of uncertainty. 9/11 was epitomized, through the media and government's response as an unprecedented and therefore unpredictable attack. But the number of fictional representations of terror within American culture, which include planes crashing into buildings and their dramatic collapse, reveal the implicit lie in saying 9/11 was unprecedented. To the contrary, it seemed to be the very form of terror we (unconsciously) desired. But it was its conversion from fiction to reality that made it politically relevant. That it remains a symbol of terror almost ten years away from the historic moment of its event proves that the rippling effects of its significance are widening more than contracting. The 'war on terror' which so decisively shaped the Bush administration survived intact into the Obama administration, albeit renamed "overseas contingency operations." Replacing the Cold War, 9/11 has become the new symbol of terror, demanding a vigilant American Empire. It has become a

focal point for political upheaval and violence on a global scale. But as different groups feel the pull of the event in varied ways, the affect of such a symbol is not universalizing but polarizing. Therefore it remains crucial for academia to re-appropriate this symbol of terrorism, and if it is still possible to liberate 9/11's reality from its politics. Since ongoing wars owe their existence to the construction of this particular fantasy of terrorism it is essential that we restructure our interpretation of the event in a rationally consistent framework. We must excise this fantasy of from our body politic by establishing a universal interpretation within our symbolic that is not a death of the real.

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