

The Terrorist Event

Bill Nichols

San Francisco State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Nichols, Bill. "The Terrorist Event." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1026>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1026)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 9 Issue 1 (March 2007) Article 15
Bill Nichols, "The Terrorist Event"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/15>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007)
Thematic Issue *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror*
Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his article "The Terrorist Event," Bill Nichols examines how the U.S. media attempted to make meaning of the events of 9/11. How were news anchors and producers to explain an event that escaped their comprehension? Without context or historical equivalence in the U.S., news outlets groped for a narrative in which to frame the event even if that meant creating the meaning themselves. In their attempt to create meaning, what sorts of fetishes and fantasies did they draw-on and in turn create? The result is that the U.S. excuses itself from its own past and future barbarism as it sets a course, "under the banner of 11 September," as the "crusading force of Good at war with the terrifying face of Evil." Nichols focuses in his essay on the role that the media played in shaping public consciousness of the terrorist attacks. Most importantly, he analyzes the role that the media plays in ratifying certain narrative tropes used to define extraordinary events.

Bill NICHOLS**The Terrorist Event**

Viewing Disaster: The eleventh of September, 2001 introduced the United States to the experience of domestic terrorism as no other event has ever done. For most people, word of this event first arrived as live television news. We are at home, or work. We see images of disaster of an extraordinary magnitude. As the morning of September 11, 2001 unfolds, television news anchors interrupt regular programming to speak to us from their studio chambers as they report what eludes their comprehension. Their reports and images offer evidence of a catastrophic event but provide no context or perspective. It is as if live television coverage rips the flesh from the face of the world and hurls it into our living rooms. Shocking, grotesque, obscene -- this should not be conceivable. And yet it occurs -- as rippled relays of incomprehensible destruction, catastrophic ruin.

Live television coverage tumbles forward as interminable flow. The usual interruptions for advertisements and changes of program disappear. "Breaking news" gives an irregular rhythm to the synopated, postmodern mix of images and comments, conjecture, summaries, descriptions, repetitions, and interviews that tumble forward. News anchors in the studio, reporters in the field, witnesses and survivors, news footage taken and transmitted, amateur footage found and recycled, still images and maps -- this work of our media bricoleurs confounds, compels, and terrifies. In this case "news" occurs outside any context. Background information does not exist. No one can narrate the unfolding of a plot when the sheer existence of a story remains uncertain. Mayhem refutes narrative. Chronology is all we have. What is happening? What does it mean? In what sense is it an event? When did it begin and when will it end? Can we stop watching before we know?

What happened on September 11 began unburdened by such considerations. They began, retrospectively, *in media res*. A plane crashes into the World Trade Center. The crash and our remote viewing of it are terrible examples of the new order of magnitude that modern technology provides to the accident. How many are injured and what can be done? Such questions abruptly shift at the moment a second plane slices through the other World Trade Center Tower. News of a third plane crashing into the Pentagon, bulletins of a fourth plane crashing in western Pennsylvania, and reports that the President of the United States is aloft, aboard Air Force One, his response and location, unknown confirm the sense that something greater than an accident is taking place.

No accident could present so vivid but unfathomable a pattern. (The difference between accident and attack is akin to the difference between Célinian outbursts (of anti-Semitism) and Nazi excesses discussed by Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror*. As Aaron Kerner notes, there is a significant difference between an outburst and excess, "and the difference is *catastrophic*." I am generally indebted to Kerner for his insightful discussion of trauma, catastrophe and their representation (see Aaron Kerner, *Representing Abjection in the Catastrophic Experience: Bearing Witness to the Past in Ourselves*, Dissertation, Macquarie University, 2001. 65). Hours after the first occurrence, the near certainty of attack looms large. But by whom? For what purpose? As part of what plan? No one knows. Telecasts paper over this fundamental ignorance with hypotheses and speculation. Viewers -- as well as survivors, witnesses, political leaders, and military commanders -- grope for a frame within which to place this affront. Comprehension lacks a foothold. Understanding falters. News of this event catapults the nation into the grips of a trauma, a shock without meaning.

Making Meaning: "Since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it" (Blanchot 28). This remark by Maurice Blanchot pinpoints a paradox: occurrences coalesce into an event after the fact. Henceforth what seemed utterly confounding will bear a name and at least partial meaning. This phenomenon bears kinship to what Derrida discusses in terms of signs that lack meaning, that exemplify *Sinnlosigkeit*, or meaninglessness. Derrida here engages with the most common focus for the discussion of events in modern philosophy, the speech-act event. Events of a social or political nature do not seem to have prompted a great deal of philosophical consideration in recent decades (Derrida 184). The paradox is that such signs still bear meaning -- as examples of the meaningless. This creates a radical dilemma; how to understand that which cannot be understood within the usual rules of discourse or action but which serves the key role of

exemplifying where the borders of the illogical, irrational and inhuman begin. Our initial encounter with disaster cannot, therefore, stand as an experience of what has yet to be named. Experience is retroactive; encounter is traumatic. But once a disastrous occurrence is identified as an event, as 9/11 was to be, it becomes a candidate for topical address and historical placement. "Is it an event?" yields to a yet more politically fraught question, "What *kind* of event is it?" Every answer carries moral, political and ideological implications. Agreement about the *fact* of the event converts a series of incidents into a conceptual whole. This whole identifies and frames. Debate about the *kind* of event recruits this episode to a larger discursive chain. This is narrative. The "event unit" enters into discourse that embeds the event within an unfolding process of interpretation and response. Time, arrested by trauma, unwinds toward interpretation.

As a tele-mediated crisis, September 11 was exceptional. The instantaneous transmission of its stupendous monumentality, its horrific trauma, coupled to profound initial uncertainty about its nature, extent or purpose collapsed a process that took infinitely longer for those who bore the brunt of the events that took place at Hiroshima or Nagasaki in 1945. It immediately put the process of making sense of what first appeared as senseless annihilation to the test for all who saw and heard, regardless of geographic proximity. Passing this test meant finding an identifiable shape in something looming at the boundary of all those events that constitute a culture, a civilization, and a history. Both these operations—identification of a shape and narration of a sense—serve vital functions, but at what price do our media, commentators and politicians deploy them when the occurrence exposes the phantasmagoric underbelly of any response that must incorporate barbarism into the discourse of the body politic?

In *Search of a Pattern: Identification with and narratives about the attack of September 11* invite consideration of "the modernist event." The modernist event involves those technologically assisted events of such scale and horror -- genocide, nuclear warfare, mass starvation, "ethnic cleansing," and so forth -- that the very notion of an adequate historical narrative fall into question. (A flexible sense of technology in relation to the modernist event allows for both hi-tech devastation such as the deployment of atomic bombs against the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and low-tech devastation such as the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Hutus in Rwanda by means of little more than machetes, clubs and, sometimes, handguns and rifles. This latter example clearly implicated institutions such as the Catholic Church and technologies such as those of the mass media but it relied for its efficacy on a Malthusian technology of populations: a large segment of the Hutu population itself acted as an instrument of terror.) Since the term "modernist event" is Hayden White's, further discussion of it might as well also be his: "[modernist events] function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacity to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.... It is the anomalous nature of modernist events -- their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning them meanings -- that undermines not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of "the event" in general.... [One result is the difficulty] felt by present generations of arriving at some agreement as to their *meaning* -- by which I mean, what the facts established about such events could possibly tell us about the nature of our own current social and cultural endowment and what attitude we ought to take with respect to them as we make plans for our own future. In other words, what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing (White 20-21; I have rearranged the order of White's comments the better to fit their adaptation here).

Unlike coronations and military campaigns, legislation and uprisings, the modernist event resists the traditional forms of realist narrative. Our customary ritual for making meaning -- tell a psychologically plausible, psychologically coherent story -- proves inadequate. Causation, plot, subjects, heroes or narrative agents -- all these seem insufficient to the task of addressing events of modernist magnitude. Nonetheless, the media and the U.S. government have concurred, for the most part, on what

the events of September 11 mean but they have done so, I would argue, by treating the event as a traditional rather than a modernist one. They have, that is, attempted to impose plausibility and coherence on the event, and in doing so have exposed something of the phantasmagoric underbelly to our traditional rituals for making meaning. The difficulty leaders have experienced in acknowledging the traumatic nature of the event and the work of mourning relative to the prosecution of a "war on terrorism" against an ill-defined, extra-territorial and extra-governmental enemy is one indication of the failure of this imposition. The doubtful application of categories of agency, responsibility, policy or purpose to an enemy whose location and even existence remain uncertain, coupled to the vigorous desire to apply such categories to an enemy of known location and conduct, such as Saddam Hussein, is another.

It is little wonder that the first extended reexamination of the events of September 11 on network television was a two-hour, CBS special, *9/11*, broadcast on the six month anniversary of the event and organized around the footage of a pair of independent documentary filmmakers from France, the Gaudet brothers. (The filmmakers actually worked in video, using a lightweight digital camera. This technology afforded them access and mobility to an extraordinary degree. It also posed issues of tact. In being to see so much of what there was to see, they constantly had to decide whether to include such sights as the plummeting bodies of workers who jumped from the upper floors of the towers or the sundered remains of those caught in the debris. One cannot know from the program itself if the filmmakers consistently refused to record such sights, or they were removed in the course of editing. The sound of bodies striking canopies and the ground, however, is quite apparent, once the viewer assigns a cause to this unexplained effect.) The filmmakers began their film, on the everyday life of a New York City fireman, in the months before September 11, but they found their fireman, and themselves, swept up in the maelstrom of the event itself. Their efforts took them inside the World Trade Center buildings and captured the collapse of the towers. It observed the extraordinary conduct of their hero and his comrades as they risked their own lives to save others, not knowing what had happened in any detail or how acute the risks actually were. The larger meaning of the event remains elusive in their "on the scene" footage, even though it was edited well after the fact. It returns us to the original trauma but with a perspective that restores some sense of meaning or coherence by showing how some men respond, with grace and dignity, to a crisis whose full significance remains occluded from view.

Heroic firemen made an understandable choice for a focus. Such figures come closest to the human agents of old. They, both during and in the aftermath of the event, afforded a way of "indexing the irruption of fate, destiny, grace, fortune, providence and even of 'history' itself into a life" to yield meaning. Such meaning propelled us beyond the immediacy of catastrophe and trauma into the region of mythic struggle against the forces of darkness. The phantasms of melodrama recur. As their hero fireman says regarding his choice of profession, "I just wanted to do good with my life." It is no wonder Americans have seized upon these men and women as heroes in a classic and profound sense. They offer linkage to a past tradition of courage, sacrifice and bravery and they restore some shard of meaning to a landscape denuded of the significance it had once been made to bear.

In the case of 9/11 tele-mediated sensory impressions arrive that day and in the immediate aftermath as an ebb and flow of shock and sensation, spectacle and information, without division into clear and distinct signifying units. Narrative structure proves elusive. We respond to this initial disturbance with a violent launching of narrative energy, but with what heroes and villains, with what sense of agency and responsibility, suspense and resolution shall we populate this narrative? The *desire* to answer such questions is intense but the modernist event thwarts them at every turn.

What's the story? As a word, "event" harbors the difficulty of assigning meaning in its very definition. Dictionary definitions such as "occurrences of some importance," "something that happens," or "that which follows from a course of proceedings," make it clear that events lack a consistent, internal structure; their identification follows from the retrospective impression that an "occurrence of some importance" has taken place. The etymology -- from L. *evenutus*, fr. past part. of *evenire*, fr. *ē* + *venire* [out + to come, hence, to come out] -- also suggests an origin that defines serves to define the event. And yet this origin in a prior moment proves elusive since it is only *after* its occurrence that the

event proves identifiable. The sense of an origin is, perhaps, the fiction necessary to disavow the impression that events occur *sui generis* even if this is how they may be initially experienced, especially traumatic ones. Ritual or predictable events such as a parade or birth might appear to have specific causes or origins, but even these points of origin dissolve into larger and longer chains of preconditions that do more to establish the *possibility* of the event than to guarantee its occurrence.

Framing Things: There is no satisfactory meaning to a traumatic event; this is what makes it traumatic. Bestowing form enacts a misrecognition of the fundamental nature of the experience itself, what Blanchot termed our inability to experience a disaster that is always defined as a disaster after the fact. The emergence of a gestalt—a sudden "aha experience" that assembles parts into a conceptual whole—betrays the very thing to which it retroactively refers. This infidelity to staggeringly hurtful experience is what, I take it, those who stress the unrepresentability of catastrophes and traumas such as the Holocaust wish to emphasize above all. (The best known articulation of this infidelity or betrayal of experience by expression is Theodore Adorno's "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" ("Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric") (Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974. Vol. 10, 30). Another account that takes account of Adorno's reconsiderations is Berel Lang's. Lang acknowledges the challenge art, and historical narrative, face: "The denial of individuality and personhood in the act of genocide; the abstract bureaucracy that empowered the "Final Solution," moved by an almost indistinguishable combination of corporate and individual will and blindness to evil, constitute a subject that in its elements seems at odds with the insulation of figurative discourse and the individuation of character and motivation that literary "making" tends to impose on its subjects." Lang goes on to consider silence as an inevitable limit rather than necessary prohibition. "The Representation of Limits," in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 316-17). Whether Adorno and Lang remain within the grips of a traditional, realist aesthetic or acknowledge the potential for representation of modernist and post-modern strategies may be an important question to pursue. Whether the act of writing poetry must be counterbalanced against the act of forgetting the Holocaust also deserves consideration of the sort Lang's comments make possible. My own account of September 11, in its focus on the mass media and popular response, also addresses realist strategies and attempts to demonstrate how they are both adequate and inadequate to the experience of the event.

A preliminary type of differentiation -- the identification of a figure/ground relationship, a covering gestalt image ("accident," or "terrorism," for example) -- generates the discrete units necessary for discourse. Once accomplished, identifying the event *by kind* requires a narrative that will make sense of it, which will explain its importance and locate it in relation to that from which it comes out. "This is an act of God," "This is an accident," "This is social trauma," or "This is terrorism," propose different stories of origin and meaning. One telling example of gestalt recognition comes from William Langewiesche's chronicle of the event in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Sam Melisi, an assistant in the engine room of a New York City fireboat, was reading when the first plane struck. He stopped reading. He prepared the boat to get underway. Then, Langewiesche writes, "When the second airplane hit, he understood it meant war, and he had a strange impression of feeling every possible emotion all at once" (58).

Such frames or proto-narratives build upon the recognition and misrecognition involved in the identification of the event itself. In the case of 9/11, the dominant story told by the media and U.S. government tends to reassert the primacy of individual subjects as victims, survivors, and perpetrators, the centrality of terrorist activity, the need to intensify homeland security, the combination of innocence and righteousness that characterizes the American ethos, and the necessity of retaliation against an anti-American, anti-capitalist, anti-democratic enemy. Once named, the mourning of a traumatic event can commence. But once named in *this* particular way, within *this* particular narrative frame, the work of mourning may find itself minimized or subordinated to goals other than the actual acknowledgment and working through of loss. Such subordination of emotional reflection may very well spill over into a prolonged disavowal of suffering or the infliction of suffering, loss or the imposition of loss, turmoil or the creation of turmoil. The "terrorist event" takes its place within a larger nar-

rative chain that classifies it and gives it meaning. This amounts to labeling or framing -- a metacommunication that has great operational significance since it what allows the launching of a narrative. As Gregory Bateson remarks "in many instances, the frame is consciously recognized, and even represented in vocabulary ('play,' 'movie,' 'interview,' 'job,' 'language,' [conference presentation, terrorism], etc.). In other cases, there may be no explicit verbal reference to the frame, and the subject may have no consciousness of it. The analyst ... infers its existence in the subject's unconscious" (Bateson 186-7). Framing establishes the rules of the game; it identifies the most plausible narrative genre. Whether implicitly or explicitly recognized by the framer, the frame possesses psychical reality. Psychical reality is the zone occupied by fantasy.

Frames and Fetishes: When Lacan discusses the Gestalt image of a coherent, powerful Other that characterizes the mirror-stage, he makes clear that the Other does not, in fact, possess such qualities. (Lacan adopts the term "gestalt" as well as that of the "aha experience" in his discussion of the mirror-stage. "The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted. Lacan, as I understand him, is acknowledging the role of misrecognition or fantasy that comes into play when the child imagines its body to have the wholeness and integrity it "sees" in the gestalt that the child assigns to the image reflected back to him (Lacan, *Écrits* 2). The search for those gestalts that yield coherence and wholeness signifies the work of desire. And in constructing the "mise-en-scène of desire," the definition of fantasy proposed by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (318), we produce the frames and categories that grant our collective dramas powerful but imaginary coherence. The impression of coherence amounts to an over-valuation or misrecognition. A "click of recognition" or Aha *Erlebnis* snaps a sense of meaning or identity into place, such as occurred for Sam Melisi and many others like him in the moment when a *second* plane struck The World Trade Center. A frame suddenly coheres. The over-valuation of wholeness and coherence goes hand in hand with a disavowal of partiality and fragmentation. When we over-value, we fetishize. To look more closely at the framing of trauma, a slight excursion in the debates occasioned by efforts to represent or historically account for the Holocaust will prove helpful. One invaluable reference point is the volume of essays edited by Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*. One essay in particular offers a critique of a certain mode of German historiography that has sought to minimize the trauma, downplay the question of responsibility, and, hence, displace the whole question of responsibility to an "elsewhere," that is somewhat peripheral to the overall story of German national history. Eric Santer analyzes Andrea Hillgruber's *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Two Kinds of Ruin: The Shattering of the German Reich and the end of the European Jews) as an example of these tendencies. The book attempts to commemorate the devastation of the Nazi army under the advance of the Soviets while paying scant attention to either the huge number of Russian fatalities sustained during the war or to the extermination of six million Jews. For this and other works, Santer proposes a distinction. Recounting traumatic historical events must either engage in the work of mourning or resort to what he calls narrative fetishism (143-54). Mourning begins with the acknowledgment of trauma and its destabilizing effect on the psyche; narrative fetishism begins with the disavowal of trauma. Narrative fetishism is Santer's attempt to give name to an unnamed, unconscious framing device used by some historians like Hillgruber in relation to the Holocaust. For Santer, "[narrative fetishism] ... is the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere." ("By narrative fetishism I mean the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place... [It contrasts with the work of mourning in that] "narrative fetishism, by contrast, is the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. Narrative fetishism releases one from the burden of having to reconstitute one's self-identity under 'posttraumatic' conditions; in narrative fetishism, the 'post' is indefinitely postponed"

(144). Mourning has certainly occurred for the trauma of September 11, but the bulk of the subsequent media coverage displays more of the characteristics of narrative fetishism than of mourning, especially through its focus on the President, federal government agencies, and their fantasy of an invincible, implacable U.S.-America that will remain intact to the extent that the villainous enemies (the site and origin of loss) are located in the radical "elsewhere" of a presumably alien religious fanaticism and nihilistic political philosophy.)

This is a special type of origin story. It is an account of loss that proposes traumatic events come from *outside* the field of social relations in which we constitute our own identity. They come from elsewhere. Narrative fetishism cannot be recognized for what it is, a fantastic story of disavowed trauma, and still achieve its desired effect. The unconscious, however, affords it a psychological reality so that its benefits can be enjoyed while its actual existence as a framework can be denied. This is a case where, as Bateson noted, the analyst infers its existence in the subconscious. Narrative fetishism is a political, moralizing strategy of framing, one that exonerates the narrator, and reader, from complicity or devastating trauma. As a strategy it transforms the modernist event into a traditional one, available to representation in conventional terms. This strategy has played itself out both in domestic news coverage and commentary and in the Bush administration's post 9/11 foreign policy of preemptive strikes against those who may intend to strike us and of a declared war on terrorism. A mass-mediated government framing of the event that has minimized mourning and forestalled melancholia by its insistence on a righteous, crusading triumphalism against a barbarous axis of evil.

The story of "terrorism" eradicates the mythic story of heroic endeavor in favor of a fantastic story of moral triumph over absolute evil. What Leslie Stahl reported in 1985, as "a pattern of terrorism which [the government] believes may be an attempt to test the will of ... the American people" requires no concrete reference. A permanent state of Manichean struggle prevails: the national continues to be tested; evil terrorists and good Americans continue to confront each other across the chasm between history and society, on the one hand, and eternal evil, on the other. Attention turns to the crusade ahead and away from the iterative pattern of occurrences in which the complicity of state power would replace the innocence of human goodness and away from the continuous process of doing that understands the specification of an event as a work of fantasy. Civilization disavows association with the ground of barbarism from which it must consistently stand out. It directs attention to a future time populated by revenge and mourning, triumph and grief, retribution and memorialization. "Terrorism" allows "civilization" to reassert itself as the epitome of Good.

Mourning has certainly occurred for the trauma of September 11, but the bulk of the subsequent political response and media coverage displays more of the characteristics of narrative fetishism than of mourning, especially through its focus on the President, and his fantasy of an invincible, implacable U.S.-America that will remain intact to the extent that the villainous enemies (the site and origin of loss) are located in the radical "elsewhere" of an alien religious fanaticism and nihilistic political philosophy completely at odds with U.S.-American principles and conduct.

Naming this event a terrorist act by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, his stateless network, and at least rhetorically linking this network to a trio of states constituting the axis of evil (North Korea, Iran, Iraq -- none known to be primary havens for Al Qaeda), clearly affirms the intactness of a sovereign, national identity for the United States. It locates the origin of terror decisively elsewhere, in a realm of anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, fundamentalist fanaticism -- qualities, presumably, utterly alien to the value and principles of the U.S. government and its leaders. It simultaneously disavows alternative frames and places from which events such as 9/11 come, such as "the injurious effects of oppression," "colonialism, globalism, and the subaltern response," "national liberation struggles," "resentment," or the "paranoid style" of some form of national politics. Richard Hofstadter's comments in "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" on the thought processes of the political paranoid, written over thirty years ago, appears to have the Bush administration (and certainly Bin Laden) in mind: "He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be

totally eliminated -- if not from the world, at least from the theater of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand for unqualified victories [for which the administration continues to struggle mightily to find a functional objective correlative -- bn] leads to the formulation of hopelessly demanding and unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's frustration"(Hofstadter 33).

Narrative fetishism rules out of bounds the complicity that might be understood to follow from the history of U.S. foreign intervention, often by means of military or paramilitary assistance in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; support of the Saudi Arabian royal family and the perceived corruption of Saudi national culture by both fundamentalist and democratic segments of the Saudi population, and U.S. support for Afghanistan's war of resistance against the Soviet Union, waged primarily by forces that gave rise to the Taliban government that would give terrorists a base and hence require ouster. The Bush administration's identification of the attacks of 9/11 as a "terrorist event" from elsewhere has centered public response on the eradication of an evil that lurks beyond the pale of diplomacy, international relations, or the rule of law. Through the disavowal achieved by narrative fetishism, terrorism takes on a phantasmagoric and absolutist existence entirely distinct from its quasi-legitimate counter-part, state terrorism. State terrorism outside the Arab world remains unidentified and unnarrativized, certainly in relation to 9/11. It takes on a phantasmagoric appearance of the purely fictional rather than asserting itself as the *mise-en-scène* of a desire for control that rejects hegemonic dominance in favor of amorphous but pervasive violence.

State terrorism deploys a distinct technology in the Foucauldian sense. The State deploys a technology of semiotic diffusion: anonymous technocrats of violence produce signifiers of threat and violence. Fragmentary occurrences -- a disappearance, a torture that leaves no signs, a decayed corpse - - serve as ellipses for an event that cannot be identified and a narrative that cannot be told. Such occurrences border on the meaningless but contain hints of pattern and meaning. The perpetrators allow the modern media to discover these signs and disperse them, intensifying a reign of suspicion and fear (the photos of torture from Abu Ghraib were a flood rather than a discrete leak of such images and they reached the wrong audience: the international public rather than the Iraqi population alone. They threatened to expose the clandestine, surreptitious nature of state terror). The terrorist event, on the other hand, deploys a technology of destructive concentration: Promethean martyrs to a belief beg, borrow or steal the power of modern technology from its creators to maximize the catastrophic event. Shards and fragments of what once was become metaphors of disaster.

To summarize the difference, state terrorism as a covert implementation of the power of the nation-state favors 1) invisibility (as embodied in the Nazi policy of *Nacht und Nebel* or the Argentine government's policy of "disappearing" suspected dissidents), 2) camouflaging or suppressing overt signs of its own violence, 3) denying governmental involvement with or knowledge of any identifiable subject to whom accountability can be assigned and, often, of any victim to be identified, arrested or tried (the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib remains, in these terms, an exceptional event perpetrated by low-ranking, sadistic personnel); 4) cultivating a state of diffuse anxiety by minimizing the identification of specific actions as events; 5) stressing a general condition of extraordinary threat that legitimates counter-measures, which, to be efficacious, must remain clandestine, and 6) utilizing the media to report fragmentary accounts of unidentifiable and unexplainable occurrences that serve to reinforce a diffuse sense of continuous anxiety. This is terrorism as non-event, as that which does not happen, that comes out of nothing, and cannot, therefore, be confronted or altered. It is the terror of Kafka's universe rather than that of Bin Laden's.

Terrorism against the state, such as the attack of 9/11, sets out to induce a sense of powerlessness. What characterizes non-state or anti-state terrorism are 1) instead of invisibility, visibility. Violence is less strategic, as it would be in a revolutionary movement, than dramaturgical. Such violence calls less for a military strategist than an impresario; 2) instead of covert violence, overt violence staged as spectacle; 3) instead of denying responsibility, nominating perpetrators (this ranges from groups who "claim responsibility" to suicide bombers or the 9/11 hijackers who become indissolvable from the event itself) and, often, expressing indifference to the identity or guilt of actual victims; 4) instead of minimizing the identification and narrativization of discreet events, cultivating a wide-

spread state of immediate shock by maximizing the traumatic event as mass catastrophe, 5) instead of stress on a threat that requires extralegal response, stressing the full legitimacy if not sacred quality of a law beyond the law since the Law is understood to have already denied the terrorist any hope of success, and 6) instead of utilizing the media to diffuse anxiety, using the media as a means to intensify immediate trauma across vast geographic spaces and populations.

In *The Believer*, a film by Henry Bean (2001), the anti-Semitic Jew, Daniel, confides in his friend, Curtis that he wants to kill a Jew. Curtis asks how and Daniel answers: In broad daylight, in the street, with a small caliber hand-gun, without a silencer: "Why without a silencer? Because I want it to be an event." And in Kevin Macdonald's documentary film, *One Day in September*, one of the surviving terrorists from the capture of the Israeli Olympic team as hostages at the 1972 Munich Olympics, Jamal Al Gashey, proclaims, at a news conference, "I'm proud of what I did at Munich because it helped the Palestinian cause enormously. Before Munich the world had no idea about our struggle, but on that day the name 'Palestine' was repeated all over the world." Al Gashey fantasizes that this strange, incomprehensible distortion of the usual process of identification achieves terrorist goals in a way that no state-sponsored act of terror would ever dream of doing.

Fetishism and Fantasy: The story of terrorism is not fantastic in the sense of unbelievable -- in the case of September 11 it is all too believable -- but in the sense that as an event it, like other fantasies, represents the fulfillment of a wish: the wish, in this case, for a category or story to encapsulate and thereby gives coherence to modernist trauma. This fulfillment is, on the level of the unconscious mechanism of fantasy propelling it, real, regardless of whether the occurrences narrativized belong to the imagination or history. (Fantasy, as the staging of desire, occupies a complex position in relation to reality. The idea that fantasy and imaginary gratification eventually yields to a reality principle and delayed gratification may oversimplify. As Laplanche and Pontalis note in their commentary on fantasy, the psychoanalyst seeks to unearth fantasies on multiple levels. "As the [psychoanalytic] investigation progresses, even aspects of behavior that are far removed from imaginative activity, and which appear at first glance to be governed solely by the demands of reality, emerge as emanations, as 'derivatives' of unconscious phantasy. In the light of this evidence, it is the subject's life as a whole which is seen to be shaped and ordered by what might be called, in order to stress this structuring action, 'a phantasmatic' (*une fantasmatique*)" (*The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 317). As a framing device, the prevailing story of the "terrorist event" has served to assert mastery over trauma by situating the origin, if not the site, of loss elsewhere. The story of terrorism has been used to focus attention beyond the traumatic event and the work of mourning, and still carry out the resolution of trauma described by Freud: "[Following a trauma] there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem [rather than self-defense] arises instead -- the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in a psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of" (30). Disposition, for Freud, meant mourning, in a successful case, and melancholic neuroses in unsuccessful ones. Narrative fetishism proposes yet another route.

In their discussion of fantasy, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis note that Freud regards fantasies as answers to an unconscious wish that is incapable of attaining consciousness but which nonetheless betrays itself. Laplanche and Pontalis cite a quite shocking analogy used by Freud himself. It is, though, one that may itself "betray" the unconscious work of narrative fetishism. Fantasy, Freud asserts, shares a common property with a person of mixed race! Such a person may seem like us, but they inevitably betray a difference: "We may compare [fantasies] with individuals of mixed race who, taken all round, resemble white men, but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people" (cited in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 317).

Certainly fantasies can quite often be identified and differentiated, but the implication that they can or should be segregated from an uncontaminated field of social reality is, at best, an extremely unfortunate by-product of Freud's choice of a racial analogy. For Freud, fantasy is different from social reality, or its stand-in, "white men," as women are different by dint of "castration" or a person of mixed race different by dint of "some striking feature or other". What seems more plausible is that

fantasy as psychological reality is not so fully separable from social reality and that the attempt to effect such a separation betrays its own fantastic premises, rather starkly in the case of this quote. Freud wanted to stress the process by which we exclude fantasy from considerations of reality. What betrays the phantasmagoric dimension to the administration's story of the "terrorist event" is the effort to make its origin wholly foreign. The "striking features," whose presence Freud assures us will betray the fantasy, appear here in an Orientalist rather than racist guise. The crime, however, continues to bear resemblance to the miscegenation at the root of Freud's analogy; the penetration of an alien fanaticism into our midst has betrayed itself by the disaster it has wrecked. Evil has undone the work of good.

Fantasy, Continued: The Doer of the Deed. The authors of a collection of essays, *Formations of Fantasy*, try to make the political importance of fantasy clear in their introduction by reminding us of the separation so vigorously upheld under the law between thought and deed. This protection accorded to thought, and to most forms of speech, they argue allows the political left to dismiss the realm of thought, and fantasy, as irrelevant to political struggle. They argue, "The imperative to maintain this particular limit to the jurisdiction of the state (to protect thought from the law until manifest in concrete deeds) has no doubt contributed to that climate of hostility which today prevails, on the democratic left, against *any* consideration of psychology in connection with the political. One consequence (perhaps most conspicuously displayed in the consistent failure of the left to understand nationalism) has been that the mobilizing force of *fantasy* has been effectively ceded to the right" (Burgin, Donald, and Kaplan 1). The surveillance nature of homeland security and a military policy of preemptive strikes rather than deterrence and war on terrorism reject the protection of thought that the left wished to rule out of bounds politically. The aggrieved becomes the aggressor, acting out what he fantasizes someone else has in store for him before that someone can convert thought to deed.

Our government vows to destroy the cause of this grievous attack and to seek out those "striking features" (fanaticism, secretiveness, isolation, mysterious sources of funds, and so on, even, for some "Arabness" of any kind and Islam of any stripe) that "betray" an alien presence wherever it might be found. The mainstream media and Bush administration have created an unfinished story of terrorism, offering a vantage point from which the event's origin can be traced, and a vanishing point toward which the event recedes ("elsewhere"). The event, indeed, proceeds from something, and what, in this scenario, it is made to "come out" of is a fantasy of terror -- a vast, annihilating, alien force.

Recognizing the identifiable figure of the terrorist, and naming him, provides a doer for the deed. "A being is hurt, and the vocabulary that emerges to moralize that pain is one which isolates a subject as the intentional originator of an injurious deed.... The subject is not only fabricated as the prior and causal origin of a painful effect that is recast as an injury, but the action whose effects are injurious is no longer an action, the continuous present of "a doing," but is reduced to a "singular act" (Butler 45). Furthermore, "the subject appears only as a consequence of a demand for accountability; a set of painful effects is taken up by a moral framework that seeks to isolate the 'cause' of those effects in a singular and intentional agent, a moral framework that operates through a certain economy of paranoid fabrication and efficiency" (Butler 46). These comments by Judith Butler, regarding legal debates about injurious speech, describe a mechanism that comes into play to identify a concrete perpetrator so that a story of justice can unfold. A similar story has evolved since September 11.

Trauma converts to injury, injury requires redress; redress demands finding the subject responsible. The name "terrorism" gives a face and a figure to an excess that typically escapes the categories of history, narrative and meaning. It disavows the complicities involved in such a framing device (the continuous present of a global, capitalist "doing") and postpones indefinitely the work of mourning trauma demands. The Bush administration can address its future intentions toward that figure to which they assign responsibility for the unconscionable in the very moment when they misplace this figure -- "elsewhere". We are asked to accept undemocratic, unconstitutional forms of recourse (i.e., state terrorism and the suspension of civil liberties) since that which we oppose occupies a liminal space between the human and inhuman. In other words, the official U.S. response requires a mise-en-scène of desire populated by inhuman subjects against whom the normal democratic rituals and hegemonic processes need no longer apply. (Subjects, of course, retain the "fantastic" ability to contest

their very status and to institute those forms of transformation that alter the institutional frame that necessitates their interpellation in terms of the need to locate the one accountable. Subversion and resistance turn accountability against those who judge the judged. Such actions are revolutionary rather than terrorist and lie beyond the scope of this essay except to note that the U.S. response to September 11 has given authority to several nations to name armed opposition and revolutionary movements as ipso facto terrorist.)

What is at stake is whether the form of narrative given to the event by the Bush administration disavows the striking features of the fantasy involved in individuating the doer and singularizing the act, in segregating the doer and the deed out from a continuous stream of historical consequences, and of constructing a special category of agent out of whom comes the rejection of law, the nullification of being, the rule of terror. Narrative fetishism freezes a traumatic moment into a mythic binary of Manichean struggle: them/us, love/hate, good/evil; civilization/barbarism. ("You are either with us or against us," as President Bush has put it.) These binaries mask a hierarchy. "U.S., love, civilization" define the limits of the human. What lies beyond ("them/evil/hate/barbarism") lies beyond the bounds of human conduct. Historical narratives require human agents -- be they individual or collective. Human agents are those who possess a conscience and stand morally responsible for their actions. And yet the story of the terrorist event frames as non-human these emanations of hate and violence beyond the pale of law or reason. How can the terrorist be assigned responsibility when, by definition, he exemplifies the one who acts unconscionably? How can we think we can identify a traditional historical agent of any kind in the terrorist? Modernist events in all their guises, including terrorism, continue to invite narratives of cause/effect, agent/action, and yet their technologically amplified magnitude forces such stories to betray their own "special features" as alien impositions on that apparent *Sinnlosigkeit* that defies the categories and representations of traditional narratives or a moral human order.

Evil terrorists and good Americans confront each other across the chasm between historical progress, on the one hand, and eternal evil, on the other. Attention turns to the crusade ahead and away from the iterative pattern of occurrences in which a recognition of the complicity of state power replaces a fantasy of the innocence of human goodness (here, not necessarily "elsewhere"). Civilization disavows association with the ground of barbarism from which it must consistently distinguish itself, not come out from. It directs attention to a future time populated by revenge, triumph and memorialization. "Terrorism" allows "civilization" to assert itself as the crusading force of Good at war with the terrifying face of Evil. Mobilized under the banner of September 11, the terrorist event carries forward the paradoxical logic of a fantasy in which the nation strives to eradicate that which simultaneously belongs to the disavowed ground of its own being.

Note: The above is a revised version of Bill Nichols, "The Terrorist Event" in *Ritual and Event: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. Mark Franko. London: Routledge, 2006. 94-108. Republished by permission of the author.

Work's Cited

- Bateson, Gregory. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Ed. Vern Carroll. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. 186-87.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- Burgin, Victor, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. "Preface." *Formations of Fantasy*. Ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. London and New York: Methuen, 1986. n.p.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Signature, Event, Context." *Glyph 1* (1977): 172-97.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P, 1953-74.
- Hallin, Dan. "Network News: 'We Keep America on Top of the World'." *Watching Television*. Ed. Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon, 1986. 9-41.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966.
- Langewiesche, William. "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center," Part II, "The Rush to Recover." *The Atlantic Monthly* 290.2 (September 2002): 58.
- Laplanche, Jean, and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1973.

Santer, Eric. "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." *Probing the Limits of Representation Nazism and the Final Solution*. Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 143-54.

White, Hayden. "The Modernist Event." *The Persistence of History*. Ed. Vivian Sobchack. New York: Routledge, 1996. 17-38.

Author's profile: Bill Nichols teaches cinema studies at San Francisco State University. He is the author of several books including *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), *Blurred Boundaries* (1994), and *Maya Deren and the American Avant Garde* (2001). Currently, he is completing a socio-political introduction to film, *Engaging the Cinema*. Email: <billnichols99@sbcglobal.net>