

## Symbolic Violence as Subtle Virulence: The Philosophy of Terrorism

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### Synopsis

Jean Baudrillard's semiotic analysis of violence leads us to understand the form of violence as three-fold: aggressive, historical, and semiotically virulent. Violence of the third form is the violence endemic to terrorism. If violence has been typically understood as of the first two types, terrorism should be understood as the virulence of simulacra. The conflation of these types of violence explains the failure of militaristic responses to terrorism. This paper will explore Baudrillard's conception of symbolic violence as the virulence of signs and help us come to terms with the semiotic foundation of terrorism.

### Biography

Jonathan Beever is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University. Jonathan works primarily in environmental and bio-ethics but also has interests in contemporary continental philosophy, political philosophy, and semiotics. He is the co-founder of the Purdue *Lectures in Ethics, Policy, and Science*.

### Essay

The analysis of terrorism by contemporary French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard presents terrorism as the violence of empty representation - from symbolic representation to simulation. While well-known,<sup>1</sup> few scholars have focused on his analysis as not merely cultural but more specifically and interestingly *semiotic*. This focus gives us a way to better understand Baudrillard's analysis and its implications post 9/11. In this presentation, I employ a semiotic framework to explore the contemporary problem of terrorism, outline three levels of violence, and distinguish these from terrorism. The goal of this analysis is to re-envision a not only political but also symbolic response to terror.

#### 1. The Problem of Terrorism

Terrorism as the violence of modernity<sup>2</sup> can be understood as any reaction against the structure of the institution, broadly construed: a reaction of Good against

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Staples' 2009 explication of Baudrillard's position on the role of the media in response to domestic terrorist acts.

<sup>2</sup> While some find the distinction outmoded, the relationship between modernity and postmodernity is still a useful heuristic for analysis of modes of cultural thinking. Neither modernity nor postmodernity ought to be considered descriptions of particular

Evil. The United States Department of Defense defines terrorism as “the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.” (DTIC) The State represents terrorism as intentionally violent threats to the system and our political ideology. On this definition, terrorism is a specifically political form of violence: one threatening civil ideologies, cultural norms, or systemic infrastructures. From this definition, the United States has seen the rise of an entire economic and political machinery in response to terrorism. Much effort has been spent in definition of, defense against, and response to real and imagined terrorist threats during the United States’ notorious Global War on Terror. But we must not accept this cultural definition *tout court*. The Department of Defense offers, as a function of its specific purpose, a narrow definition of a multi-faceted and deeply complex concept. This model provides dangerous space for the labeling of an incredibly broad group of anti-institutionalists as terrorists: the foreign nationals, the local militias, the prolific independent radio host, the local author, the anarchistic philosophy professor, the Iranian-American neighbor. By shifting the modes of representation through reinterpretation and manipulation of signs, arbitrary but definitive representations between “us” and “them” can be made in response to real or imagined threats. But on this model of semiotic Othering, no space is left to distinguish political violence from acts of terrorism<sup>3</sup>. So to hold up this definition – and so this way of thinking – as normative is to deliver a coup on behalf of the State: the enemy is the represented Other as long as there is totalization of power and of a totalization of representation.

As an anti-modern response<sup>4</sup>, Jean Baudrillard’s analysis is grounded in an understanding of the implications of semiotic representation. Here we find a delineation of the boundaries and implications of terrorism quite unlike that of modernity; this analysis offers a cynical celebration of the virulence of signification. We must here ask: what do we mean by signification and furthermore *virulent* signification? Signification is the action of signs forming these basic relationships between signified and signifier that are the foundations of meaning.<sup>5</sup> This dyadic relationship between the object and its representation stands as the basic ontological foundation for Baudrillard’s analysis of anti-modern violence. *Virulent signification*, however as we will see, is uniquely related to violence divorced from this dyadic exchange.

## II. The Forms of Violence

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historical moments but, rather, markers of modes of thought characterized by their relationship to the Grand Narratives of Society, Nature, the Good, etc.

<sup>3</sup> I leave the question open whether either violence or terrorism is in any way justified or justifiable; for, this paper offers a metaphysical and not ethical analysis of these concepts. However, I might suggest that political violence may be justifiable in conditions of political oppression and terrorism, on my analysis below, may be justifiable in conditions of *symbolic* oppression.

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard scholars have often denied the application of the term “postmodern” to his work, regarding his analysis instead as “high modernist”. However, his analysis foreshadowed the possibilities of a semiotic postmodern landscape and remained critical of the structures of modernity, making his analysis anti- or post- modernist.

<sup>5</sup> While I describe Baudrillard’s approach to signification in his dyadic terms (Saussure’s signifier and signified), the virulence of simulacra may be better explained in triadic terms (Peirce’s interpretant, representamen, and object). That is, *meaning* by way of the *interpretant* plays an active role distinct from the *representamen* and the *object* on a triadic reading. This triadic understanding likewise offers better support for Baudrillard’s insistence on the symbolic as an *exchange* rather than a concept or category. (see *Toward a Critique* 133) My use of “semiological” vs “semiotic” is meant to intentionally indicate this difference.

Baudrillard's semiotic analysis leads us through three forms of violence. In one form, violence is aggressive. Aggression is the most basic form of violence: the violence of brute strength, physical, economic, or political. This is not the violence of Odyssean slyness but rather that of Achillean brutality: the simple and efficient violence of the schoolyard bully, the corporate take-over, or the political campaign maneuvering. Baudrillard describes this form simply as "the unilateral violence of the most powerful." ("The Violence") This violence may manifest as the seat of class struggle or as interpersonal and ideological clashes.

In another form, violence is historical: the political (r)evolutions of the right over the wrong, of Good over Evil. This historical form of violence is the revolutionary reaction to aggression. It is the political overthrow: the critical, negative reaction to the oppression endemic to aggressive violence. Baudrillard also calls this form "the violence of analysis and interpretation" ("The Violence"), suggesting that historical violence signifies or stands for the very event to which it responds. Baudrillard notes, "in the name of Good, people try to give shape to Evil, for example in the terrorism they see everywhere." (*The Agony* 112) These first and second forms offer descriptions of modes of political violence.

But in a third and perhaps more fundamental form, violence becomes the act of the proliferation of the symbol.<sup>6</sup> This proliferation is a subtle and violent virulence of empty signs: the symbolic becomes a *viral* simulation that subsumes the real. For Baudrillard, this third form of violence is this exploitation and eventual disintegration of the signified real through the proliferation of the "murderous image". Violence in this form is the violence endemic to terrorism. "We are witnessing the rise," Baudrillard wrote in 1990, "of terrorism as a transpolitical form... these forms are viral – fascinating, indiscriminate – and their virulence is reinforced by their images..." ("The Transparency" 36) If the first two forms of violence are characteristic of modernity, the third symbolic form – the virulence of empty signs, or simulacra – is distinctly anti-modern.

Understanding the historic conflation of these types of violence offers us an analytic by which to understand the ultimate failure of militaristic responses to "terror": a symbolic challenge cannot be mitigated by an aggressive response or by ideological assertions from the political machine. This third form of violence is different in kind, not merely in scope or by degree. The semiotic nature of symbolic violence pushes beyond the boundaries of what I have defined as the violence of modernity not merely by representing violence through the image but by proliferating a virulent strain of symbolic violence, devoid of the real.

Under the modernist paradigm, the sign represents the real, the objective. The sign becomes an image of the real. The rapid and continued development of technological information systems has done something inherently violent to the real, through the viral proliferation of the image. The image begins to take precedence: the reality show and the advertising campaigns, the political slander and the ideological newscasts stand up *in place of* the real. The relation to the real offered by the sign becomes one of suggestion or manipulation. We wonder why the number of Americans who believe that President Obama is a Muslim had *grown* to one-in-five by 2010 (Pew), or why a single book-burning by an ultra-conservative Florida pastor that same year could be considered a legitimate threat to the fastest-growing and second-largest religion in the world (Cave). For Baudrillard, the answer lies in the *virulent* rise of the

<sup>6</sup> While Baudrillard wrote in March of 1976 that "...symbolic violence in itself has no more to do with signs than it has to do with the relationship between forces." (*Utopia* 242), he intended to uphold the distinction between signs and simulacra. However, simulacra are signs, albeit empty ones. Thus, I claim that symbolic violence is indeed semiotic in nature.

simulation. “Finally, the real world becomes a useless function, a collection of phantom shapes and ghost events. We are not far from the silhouettes on the walls of the cave of Plato.” (“The Violence”) This restatement of the theoretical point Baudrillard had made as early as 1976<sup>7</sup> marks violence as transposed from the interaction of real substance to the interplay among images in such a way that we are left actually *unaffected*. It is as if the referent disappears and is lost among the virulence of signification.

This explosion of viral signification became, for Baudrillard, a marker of our cultural condition and gave structure to his analysis of terrorism. In 1985 Brussels’ Heysel Stadium erupted in violence when Liverpool football fans broke through a barricade and rushed Juventus fans. The latter retreated, killing several in a stampede that ended in the collapse of a concrete retaining wall and further death. Baudrillard’s account of this event was a reiteration of a social theoretical point: such violence is the direct result of the political and social disaffection society suffers as a result of the virulence of the image. Explanations “...by political, sociological, or psychological approaches are simply not capable of accounting for such events.” (*The Transparency* 75-6)<sup>8</sup> A richer account is offered by Baudrillard’s analysis of the proliferation of signs replacing real events.

The symbolic exchange – the fundamentally semiotic processes that characterize the response to modernity – implicates the terror of virulent symbols as they simulate the collapse of the State. When signs begin to simulate rather than reference, the objects of those signs – be they physical or ideological – lose their footings. Political reactions, aggression against oppression, and even basic assertions to truth claims become tenuous if not impossible to uphold. The intentional aspect of violence toward the State from our original definition of terrorism here loses its centrality and terrorism becomes tied instead to the collapse of the symbol.

### III. The Symbolic Form of Terrorism

The events of the 1980’s that influenced this early analysis of symbolic violence were, for Baudrillard, heightened by the actions of and reactions to the events of September 11, 2001. The symbolic importance of 9/11 extends his analysis from violence to terrorism. The historical violence that existed as a response to oppression by the State is replaced by violence that exists in response to the virulence of simulated representation – the violence of terrorism. The strikes against and eventual collapse of the Twin Towers can be classified a terrorist attack within both frameworks we have outlined. For the Department of Defense, the event was a terrorist attack because it was an intentional aggressive-violent movement against the State. For Baudrillard, the event was a terrorist attack because it was a symbolic irruption against the empty image of the United States as State. If a handful of men had detonated explosives with no other effect than their own deaths and some collateral damage, 9/11 would not hold the

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<sup>7</sup> “...[S]imulation, in the sense that, from now on, signs are just exchanged against each other rather than against the real... The emancipation of the sign: remove this ‘archaic’ obligation to designate something and it finally becomes free, indifferent and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence.” (Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange* 7)

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the August 2011 riots in London – presumably sustained by the empty signification of the killing by police of a single local man days early – is best explained by this semiotic analysis of the event become hyperreal.

significance that it does. If the Towers had not fallen, the event would be insignificant<sup>9</sup>. Consider, as another example, the August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 earthquake that cracked the Washington Monument. “Sure we’re disappointed the monument is closed,” a woman was reported to have said, “But it would be really upsetting if it had fallen over.” (Thompson A16) Another proclaimed, “People say that the monument is broken like our political system. But the fact is, it’s still standing and so are we.” (*ibid.*) Imagine if the Monument had collapsed in sympathy with the Twin Towers. Given slightly different circumstances, the August 24<sup>th</sup> earthquake could have easily been read as a terrorist event: the collapse of yet another symbol of the State. The earthquake as the terrorist Other. Imagine, on the other hand, if the Twin Towers *had not* collapsed.

The spirit of terrorism is semiotic in nature: it is grounded in the symbolic representation of violence or, rather, the violence of symbol against the symbolic. The strike against the Twin Towers was a symbolic strike, even if the twin collapse was not the intention of the agents involved: “...Neither politically nor economically did the abolition of the Twin Towers put the global system in check. Something else is at issue here: the stunning impact of the attack, the insolence of its success and, as a result, the loss of credibility, the collapse of image.” (Baudrillard “Hypotheses” 82) An act of violent aggression became an act of terrorism through the symbolic collapse of the Towers-as-symbol. Beyond the immense physical damage, the terrible loss of human life, and the temporary interruption of financial and social information transfer, the stability, security, and power that the Twin Towers *symbolized* was threatened. A hole was stabbed through that empty signifier and, for a moment at least, the world saw through to the fragile raw signified.

The attacks of 9/11 were unlike political violence, civil unrest, or even international acts of war in that the terrorists managed, through the resulting collapse of the image for which the Twin Towers stood, to snub the rules of violent engagement with which the State is attuned. Pearl Harbor, the Cold War stand-off, and the resulting Cuban Missile Crisis were instances of violence or potential violence that fell within the framework of the political, social, and economic system of which they were a part. These were not, or would not have been, acts of terrorism. The violence of the 9/11 attacks, however, can be classified as terrorism: the results of the bombers’ actions were symbolic in nature as well as and even to a greater degree than they were political. It was as if they had followed Baudrillard’s own “advice” when he wrote:

“Never attack the system in terms of relations of force. That is the (revolutionary) imagination the system itself forces upon you – the system which survives only by constantly drawing those attacking it into fighting on the ground of reality, which is always its own. But shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, reversion, and outbidding. *So that death can by met only by equal or greater death.* Defy the system by a gift to which it cannot respond except by its own death and its own collapse.” (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 17)

Symbolic violence is terrorism in that it perpetuates events that thrust the ontological emptiness of simulacra up against the representations of the Real. This terrorism

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<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard foreshadows the symbolic importance of the Twin Towers even in his 1976 *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: “The fact that there are two identical towers *signifies* the end of all competition, the end of every original reference.... This new architecture no longer embodies a competitive system, but a countable one where competition has disappeared in favour of correlation.” (69)

frames the collapse of image around the ontological fragility of whatever the foundations of this representation might have been. In this way, symbolic violence is the violence of terrorism.

#### IV. Responses to Terror

Violence is never terrorism unless it exists as a symbolic action. This is the contribution Baudrillard offers to the ongoing international discussion seeking to define this concept. Terrorism is understood as a symbolic act – specifically the virulent proliferation of the image – as a function of systemic political antagonism but also as a function of the semiotic condition of empty simulation under which this paradigm functions. The lucid moment that the terrorist action brings to light is the recognition that the Good is a semiotic concept held up by the play of simulacra. This is the fundamental point that responses to terror have failed to comprehend.

The Department of Defense and other political, militarized organizations often respond to symbolic terrorist acts as if they were a form of aggression against the socio-political machinery of the State: they mobilize forces, exert power, seek revenge against the Other. On Baudrillard's insightful analysis this political power "plays at the real, plays at crisis, plays at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political stakes" in the face of the "play of signs." (*Simulacra* 22) From within a modernist framework, the State fails to recognize the symbolic nature of terror. It remains unable to comprehend its own weakness regarding symbolic representation and the possibility of simulation. Instead, it offers an inappropriate response to such an inherently symbolic event.

Indeed, what is the appropriate response to terror if our access is only to the precession of models, of possible symbolic representations, of simulacra? "...[W]e are in a logic of simulation," Baudrillard writes, "which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a *precession of the model*, of all the models based on the merest fact... These facts no longer have a specific trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all the models at once." (*Simulacra* 16) Responses to terror must themselves "play the game," so to speak. To avoid falling into an abyss of terror – to effectively respond to viral representation and reproduction of the symbolic event of terror – they must differentiate terrorism from political violence by its symbolic nature.

This semiotic form of violence is a challenge to our political order of power that takes into account the symbolic nature of terror and the modes of simulation and finds space between political violence and terrorist acts. Only in these terms can the State respond to that symbolic challenge with an appropriately symbolic response. And yet perhaps we see the first recognition of Baudrillard's challenge in the killing of Osama Bin Laden in May of 2011.<sup>10</sup> His assassination and the burial of his body at sea set up one symbol and denied another. This was a not merely a political move or a moment of "frontier justice", as was the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006<sup>11</sup>, but rather a wholly and importantly symbolic action: an image for an image, the semiotic justice of

<sup>10</sup> The death of Osama Bin Laden on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011 (The White House) was, arguably, the death of an empty image: a symbolic response.

<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard wrote of the Gulf War, "...Saddam Hussein, for his part, bargains his war by overbidding in order to fall back, attempting to force the hand by pressure and blackmail, like a hustler trying to sell his goods. The Americans understand nothing in this whole psychodrama of bargaining, they are had every time until, with the wounded pride of the Westerner, they stiffen and impose their conditions... The Americans... have much to learn about symbolic exchange." (*The Gulf War* 54-55)

Hammurabi done in the name of the symbol, the simulation of the Good and the Right. While we had “much to learn about symbolic exchange” (*The Gulf War* 55) in 2006, perhaps 2011 indicates our ability to learn. As such, it should be recognized as indicating impressive conceptual acuity. The objective of terrorism is rightly defined as the symbolic semiotic object. It is rightly owed a symbolic response.

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