

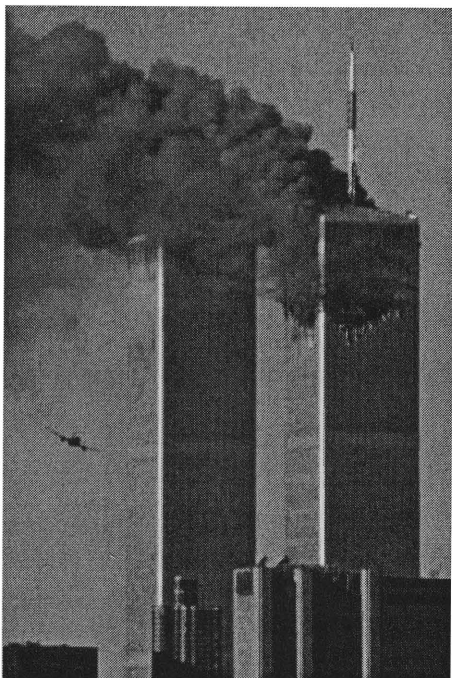
11 September 2001: A Change in the Status of the Image.

Bert Olivier

Centre for Advanced Studies
University of Port Elizabeth.
e-mail: plaggo@upe.ac.za

This article examines the impact that the recent terrorist attacks in the United States have had on the status of images in contemporary culture. First, the event is related to what may be called the “terrible sublime”. It is further argued that what Baudrillard has termed “hyperreality” has been dealt an irreparable blow by the media-images of these events.

Few recent events, if any, have evoked such horror as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. By all accounts especially the former has struck people worldwide as being virtually ungraspable to the full extent of its horror. Witnesses’ remarks which reflect such a mixture of incomprehension combined with terror, include many to the effect that such onlookers “could not believe their eyes”, and that they thought they “were watching a movie”. These remarks have struck me as being highly significant regarding what may be called “the status of the image”, especially in the media and in popular art.



© A.P and Reuters

In the first place this event and the disbelief that it caused on the part of spectators may be subsumed under a variety of the aesthetic category of the sublime – an unusual variety, one that could be termed the “terrible sublime”¹. After all, the sublime usually goes hand in hand with aesthetic pleasure, combined with a certain “pain” brought about by the inability to deal adequately with the phenomenon in question at the level of sensory apprehension or imagination. The accompanying pleasure derives from the countervailing realization that, even as the phenomenon resists sensory or imaginative representation, it can nevertheless be understood, something which therefore evinces the fact that humanity – the spectator - infinitely surpasses such overwhelming phenomena in rational terms. According to Kant (1987:106; 119-121;125) this is especially the case with regard to humanity’s moral freedom, and not only in so far as these phenomena are rationally accessible.

Clearly, the spectacle of the attacks on the 11th of September do not fit this Kantian notion of the sublime. In no way do these images evince or remind one of - as Kant argued regarding the sublime experience of overwhelming natural phenomena, for example - a tension between representability and the infinite degree to which humanity’s moral freedom surpasses the representability or the potential danger of the phenomena in question. In fact, as Johann Snyman (of Randse Afrikaans University) pointed out in a recent conversation with me about this

issue, we live in a time when we are no longer *necessarily* made aware of our moral dignity in the course of experiencing the sublime; on the contrary, events such as those of the 11th of September bear witness to the moral depravity of (at least some) human actions. As Snyman further remarked, ethical subjectivity is shattered here, instead of being elevated. It is worth noting that it is still accurate to say that image-configurations pertaining to the event in question evince an experience of the sublime, however, given the incommensurability between the images themselves and what they represent: But it is a case of the *terrible* sublime precisely because those media images of diminutive bodies (some holding hands) falling down the sides of burning buildings, and of skyscrapers imploding, hide more than they could possibly reveal of the pain, shock, suffering, death and horror being experienced at that moment in and around the buildings represented.

What has changed historically? For one thing, we live in a world that would probably have been unimaginable to Kant – a world where we can no longer presuppose the “safe vantage point” from where we can contemplate phenomena which give rise to an experience of the sublime in Kant’s terms. Nowhere in our technologically structured (perhaps even: constructed) world are we safe – we are a “risk society”, as Ulrich Beck has argued in the book by that name. And for this reason what I referred to earlier as the “terrible sublime” is one of the varieties of the sublime (perhaps increasingly the predominant one?) to which human beings have become privy in the course of the 20th century – think of Hiroshima and Auschwitz as other instances of it before September the 11th, 2001. What is different about the 11th of September concerning what I here choose to characterize as the “terrible sublime”, however, is that those earlier manifestations were not subject to mediation by images to such a decisive degree. To be sure, virtually overnight photographs of the mushroom clouds

denoting the cataclysmic nuclear explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the mid-1940s became the visual markers of a terrifying new power that had been introduced into the world. But in the context of the Pacific arena of an all too devastatingly real Second World War nobody doubted the reality of the destruction wrought by what those photographs of mushroom clouds represented. Now, more than 50 years later, however, the historical context of the September 11th attacks is significantly different.

This difference points to the second consideration regarding the 11th of September and its impact on the status of the image. The point is that, since 1945 crucial changes have taken place: modern society (or culture) has become postmodern society, a society which Thompson (1990) has characterized as a “mediated society”, in other words, one where social behaviour cannot be understood without taking into account the function of “mediated messages” in relation to such behaviour or action. Possibly the most radical assessment of this state of affairs has come from Jean Baudrillard, who has claimed that one can no longer think of an independently existing, real world which is somehow “represented” in language, art or the media. According to him (1996:77), the status of the image has passed through four successive phases: in the first phase it was taken as “reflecting” or representing a “basic reality”; in the second it was understood as “masking” or “perverting” this reality (something instantiated by the iconoclasm of the Reformation: because religious icons were seen as perversions or distortions of divine reality, they had to be obliterated); this was followed, in the third phase, by the suspicion that the image masked the “*absence* of a basic reality”; finally, according to Baudrillard, this process in the evolution of the image has reached the stage where “it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (p.77). This is

tantamount to saying that, in contemporary culture, “simulacra” in the form of images have taken the place of “reality”. The radical upshot is that simulacra hide the “truth” that there is no “real” referent or world which they represent or to which they refer.

Obviously, Baudrillard’s assessment of the status of the image strikes one as being counter-intuitive, if not downright nonsensical. We need only stretch our hands towards something we recently photographed to convince ourselves of its concrete “reality”. This rather naïve refutation of his claims would overlook their true import, however. Baudrillard has simply been reminding inhabitants of the contemporary, media-saturated world that, in the final analysis, when they require a touchstone for ascertaining the ontological mode, so to speak, of “true reality” (note the scare quotes), they intuitively turn to media images. In this world of electronically disseminated images and messages one could reformulate Bishop Berkeley’s 18th-century idealist dictum, *Esse est percipi* (“To be, is to be perceived”) to read: “To be is to be televised”. (A telling illustration of such a state of affairs is afforded by the fact that, when media reports alerted people of the imminent arrest of O.J. Simpson on a charge of suspected murder in California a few years ago, many rushed over to his house with their portable television sets where they eventually watched him being arrested by the sheriff *on television*, and – more importantly – watched *themselves* on screen [being part of the mediated images] witnessing the event [indirectly, of course]. Clearly, they wanted to be part of what, ironically, they took to be the “real” event, or, in Baudrillard’s terms, the “hyperreal” event as it unfolded in image-sequences.)

To be able to grasp the full implications of the 11th of September, 2001, as far as the status of the image is concerned, one has to keep Baudrillard’s description of contemporary social reality as “hyperreality” firmly in mind, because that terrible event has dealt “hyperreality”

a blow from which, I believe, it will never fully recover. At the outset I referred to the kind of remarks on the part of onlookers who witnessed the sequence (or part of it) of events that led to the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in downtown Manhattan – remarks such as “I could not believe my eyes”, and “I thought I was watching a movie”. I would argue that such exclamations express a mixture of disbelief and Baudrillardian “belief” in the self-sufficiency of the image (that is, the paradoxical belief that images are the touchstone of “reality”); disbelief, because, living in a media-saturated society these people had been accustomed to media- or film-*images* of such events as they were witnessing at that moment (recall the image-sequences in the film, *Independence Day*, of the destruction of the Empire State building and of the White House, for instance) – events which nevertheless, as they were unfolding, had an irresistible ring or appearance of authenticity about them despite their intertwinement with images of the “hyperreal” type. And as the full horror of what had happened became apparent in the ensuing hours, days and weeks, concretely testified to by a mountain of debris at street level and by the conspicuous gap in the Manhattan skyline where the twin towers formerly cast their silhouette, New Yorkers as well as others in whose lives and imaginations Manhattan occupies a significant place, have struggled to come to terms with the fact that the images of the disaster that have appeared in the media, and have been replayed intermittently, somehow denote more than a fictional imagining of disaster (many varieties of which have appeared in movies and TV shows).

Another way of articulating this tension between social experience of hyperreality, on the one, hand, and the shock of (re-)discovering the “real” correlates of mediated images, is by means of Barthes’s characterization of the “photographic paradox” (1977:19) – the co-existence, in the photograph, of two distinct messages; one, the photographic

analogue of given reality, “without a code”, and the other *with* a code or “relay” (e.g. the “treatment” of the photograph). The first of these, Barthes argues, is purely “denotative”, that is, continuous with visually given reality, while the second is “connotative” in so far as it is ineluctably presented in the context of social, aesthetic or professional norms and practices. The paradox, then, consists in the photograph being “natural and cultural” at one and the same time (1977:20). “Hyperreality” can then be understood as the outcome of an historical process of producing, treating and receiving media-images – the social consequence of treating “connotation” as if it is self-sufficient, as if the denotative message of photographs (or, by association, of other images) is no longer distinct from the “coded” or connotative message. What Barthes’s semiological insight illuminates about the New York disaster in relation to hyperreality, therefore, is that the “denotative” message of photographs (and, with certain qualifications, of images generally) has suddenly, violently, reasserted itself alongside of the “connotative” in the guise of hyperreality. (It is important to keep in mind, here, that the paradox Barthes refers to is a tension between *two* aspects of the photographic image – two aspects that are not reducible to one another.)

Is it at all surprising that Americans, by all accounts, have been traumatized? Given the gap separating a social sensibility predicated on the hyperreal status of images, on the one hand, and the devastating realization that, somehow, the images of the World Trade Centre being destroyed, represent or instantiate something terrifyingly real, on the other, this should come as no surprise. It should be interesting to see what strategy filmmakers will follow when similar disasters are addressed in fiction films (as opposed to documentaries) subsequent to the disaster in question. Perhaps the fact that the production of certain films, which had the terrorist destruction of skyscrapers in New York as their theme, has been

suspended, is symptomatic of something more than merely respect for the victims of the real disaster.

Notes

1 Elsewhere I have elaborated on this in relation to the complex structure of postmodern culture. Cf. Olivier 1998.

Sources cited

Barthes, R. 1977. The photographic message. In: *Image music text*. London: Fontana Press, pp.15-31.

Baudrillard, J. 1996. The map precedes the territory. In: Anderson, W.T. (Ed.) 1996. *The Fontana postmodernism reader*. London: Fontana Press, pp. 75-77.

Kant, I. 1987. *Critique of judgment*. Tr. Pluhar, W.S. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Olivier, B. 1998. The sublime, unrepresentability and postmodern cultural complexity. In: *Critique, architecture, culture, art*. Port Elizabeth: University of Port Elizabeth, pp.197-214.

Thompson, J. 1990. *Ideology and modern culture. Critical social theory in the era of mass communication*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.