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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, BEGAN AS A PERFECT DAY along the American East Coast. The sun was golden bright. The sky was blue and cloudless. On a clear day like this, the World Trade Center's twin towers resembled two exclamation marks above Manhattan's skyline, and they could be seen from many miles away in the surrounding counties of three states—New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. At 8:48 A.M., when the workday began for thousands of employees in the offices of the 110 stories of the Center's towers, a hijacked Boeing 767 crashed into the North Tower. Eighteen minutes later, at 9:06 A.M., another Boeing 767 crashed into the South Tower. Just before 10:00 A.M., the South Tower collapsed, and twenty-nine minutes later, its twin fell down. In between these events, at 9:40 A.M., a Boeing 757 dived into the Pentagon; at 10:10 A.M., another Boeing 757 crashed in Somerset County near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. September 11, 2001, was forever America's "Black Tuesday".

Within eighty-two minutes, the United States suffered a series of synchronized attacks that terminated in the most deadly, most damaging case of terrorism in history. Close to three thousand persons were killed, and the damage to properties, to businesses, and to the economic conditions in the United States and abroad was incalculable. With the symbol of America's economic and financial power toppled in New York, the symbol of U.S. military strength partially destroyed in Washington, and a symbol of political influence—most likely the White House or Capitol—spared by courageous citizens aboard another jetliner that crashed near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the impact was cataclysmic. America after the terror attack was not the same as it was before. Although the World Trade Center bombing of 1993 demonstrated that the United States is not immune to international terrorism on its own soil, and the Y2K terrorism alert reinforced that recognition, Americans were stunned by the velocity and audacity of the 2001 strike.

Apart from the relatively small number of people who were alerted by relatives and friends via phone calls from the stricken WTC towers and those eyewitnesses who watched in horror, millions of Americans learned of the news from television, radio, or the Internet. In fact, minutes after the first kamikaze flight into the North Tower, local radio and television stations as well as the networks reported first a possible explosion in the WTC, then a plane crash into one of the towers. Soon thereafter, the first pictures of the North Tower appeared on the screens, with a gaping hole in the upper floors enveloped in a huge cloud of dark smoke. As anchors, hosts of morning shows, and reporters struggled to find words to describe what was indescribable, a mighty fireball shot out of the South Tower—presumably the result of a second powerful explosion. The towering inferno was eventually replaced by another horror *scene*: one section of the headquarters of the Department of Defense engulfed in a large plume of smoke. With the cameras again on the WTC, the South Tower collapsed in what seemed like slow motion. Switching again to the Pentagon, the camera revealed a collapsed section of the facade. Amid rumors that a fourth airliner had crashed in Pennsylvania, the cameras caught the collapse of the World Trade Center's North Tower.

For at least part of this unfolding horror, many millions of Americans watched television stations or their related Internet sites. And, ironically, most Americans were familiar with the shocking images: the inferno in a skyscraper, the terrorist attack on a towering high-rise, the total destruction of a federal building in the nation's capital by terrorists, the nuclear winter landscape in American cities, Manhattan under siege after a massive terrorist attack. In search of box-office hits, Hollywood produced a steady stream of disaster movies and thrillers, often based on best-selling novels about ever more gruesome images of destruction. The entertainment industry's cavalier exploitation of violence was shockingly obvious following the terror strikes, when it was revealed that the "planned cover for a hip-hop album due to be released in November [2001] depicted an exploding World Trade Center".¹

In a popular culture inundated with images of violence, Americans could not comprehend what was happening before their eyes and what had happened already. The horror of the quadruple hijack and suicide coup was as real as in a movie, but it was surreal in life. As Michiko Kakutani observed, “there was an initial sense of déjà vu and disbelief on the part of these spectators—the impulse to see what was happening as one of those digital special effects from the big screen”.² The following quotations reflect the reactions of people who escaped from the World Trade Center, witnessed the disaster, or watched

I looked over my shoulder and saw the United Airlines plane coming. It came over the Statue of Liberty. It was just like a movie. It just directly was guided into the second tower.

Laksman Achuthan, managing director of the Economic Cycle Research Institute³

I think I’m going to die of smoke inhalation, because you know, in fires most people don’t die of burning, they die of smoke inhalation. This cop or somebody walks by with a flashlight. It’s like a strange movie. I grab the guy by the collar and walk with him.

Howard W. Lutnick, chairman of Cantor Fitzgerald⁴

I, I looked up and saw this hole in the World Trade Center building. And I—I couldn’t believe it. I thought, you know, this can’t be happening. This is a special effect; it’s a movie.

Clifton Cloud, who filmed disaster with his video camera⁵

It’s insane. It’s just like a movie. It’s, it’s actually surreal to me to see it on TV and see major buildings collapse.

Unidentified man in Canada⁶

This is very surreal. Well, it’s out of a bad sci-fi film, but every morning we wake up and you’re like it wasn’t a dream, it wasn’t a movie. It actually happened.

Unidentified woman in New York⁷

Witnessing the calamity from a tenth-floor apartment in Brooklyn, novelist John Updike felt that “the destruction of the World Trade Center twin towers had the false intimacy of television, on a day of perfect reception”.⁸ Many people who joined newscasts in progress thought that they were watching the promotion for one of several terrorism thrillers scheduled for release later in the month. Whether they realized it or not, and many did not, most people, even eyewitnesses at the disaster scenes, were far from sure whether movies had turned into life, or whether life was now a movie. Updike alluded to this sentiment when he recalled the experience:

As we watched the second tower burst into ballooning flame (an intervening building had hidden the approach of the second airplane), there persisted the notion that, as on television, this was not quite real; it could be fixed; the technocracy the towers symbolized would find a way to put out the fire and reverse the damage.⁹

In a seemingly inexplicable lapse of judgment, the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen characterized the terror attacks on the United States as “the greatest work of art”.¹⁰ His remarks caused outrage in his country and the total confusion between the real world and the “pictures in our heads” that Walter Lippmann (1949) described long before the advent of television. In particular, Lippmann suggested that “[f]or the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see”.¹¹ While many people initially identified the horrors of “Black Tuesday” as familiar motion picture images, Stockhausen may have processed the real-life horror first as a symphonic Armageddon in his head when he said: “That characters can bring about in one act what we in music cannot dream of, that people practice madly for 10 years, completely fanatically, for a concert and then die. That is the greatest work of art for the whole cosmos”. Following the uproar over his statement, Stockhausen apologized for his remarks saying, “Not for one moment have I thought or felt the way my words are now being interpreted in the press”.¹² One can only guess that the angry reactions to his statement brought him back from the pseudoreality in his head to the real-life tragedy and its consequences.

When emotions gave way to rationality, the truth began to sink in. The most outrageous production of the terrorist genre was beyond the imagination of the best special effects creators. This was not simply two hours' worth of suspense. Real terrorists had transformed Hollywood's pseudoreality into an unbearable reality, into real life. This time there was neither a happy ending to be enjoyed nor an unhappy ending that the audience could forget quickly.

Perhaps the temporary confusion was a blessing. Perhaps the fact that reality replaced media reality in slow motion helped people cope with the unprecedented catastrophe within America's borders. Perhaps the delayed tape in people's heads prevented citizens in the stricken areas from panicking, helped citizens all over the country to keep their bearings.

The greatest irony is that the terrorists who loathed America's pop culture as decadent and poisonous to their own beliefs and ways of life turned Hollywood-like horror fantasies into real-life hell. In that respect, they outperformed Hollywood, the very symbol of their hate for Western entertainment. After visiting the World Trade Center disaster site for the first time, New York's governor George Pataki said:

It's incredible. It's just incomprehensible to see what it was like down there. You know, I remember seeing one of these Cold War movies and after the nuclear attacks with the Hollywood portrayal of a nuclear winter. It looked worse than that in downtown Manhattan, and it wasn't some grade "B" movie. It was life. It was real.¹³

The question of whether imaginative novelists and filmmakers anticipate terrorist scenarios or whether terrorists borrow from the most horrific images of Hollywood's disaster films was no longer academic. Shortly after the events of September 11th, an ongoing cooperation between filmmakers and the U.S. Army intensified in order to predict the forms of future terrorist attacks. The idea was that the writers who created Hollywood terrorism might be best equipped to conceptualize terrorists' intentions. According to Michael Macedonia, the chief scientist of the Army's Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation Command, "You're talking about screenwriters and producers, that's one of the things that they're paid to do every day—speculate. These are very brilliant, creative people. They can come up with fascinating insights very quickly".¹⁴ However, it was not far-fetched to suspect that the perpetrators of the 9-11 terror took special delight in borrowing from some of the most horrific Hollywood images in planning and executing their terrorist scheme.

The Perfect "Breaking News" Production

From the terrorists' point of view, the attack on America was a perfectly choreographed production aimed at American and international audiences. In the past, terrorism has often been compared to theater. According to this explanation,

Modern terrorism can be understood in terms of the production requirements of theatrical engagements. Terrorists pay attention to script preparation, cast selection, sets, props, role playing, and minute-by-minute stage management.

(Weimann and Winn 1994, 52)

While the theater metaphor remains instructive, it has given way to that of terrorism as television spectacular, as breaking news that is watched by record audiences and far transcends the boundaries of theatrical events. And unlike the most successful producers of theater, motion picture, or television hits, the perpetrators of the lethal attacks on America affected their audience in unprecedented and lasting ways. "I will never forget!" These or similar words were uttered over and over.

After President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, most Americans and many people abroad eventually saw the fatal shots and the ensuing events on television. But beyond the United States and other Western countries, far fewer people abroad owned television sets at the time. When the Palestinian "Black September" group attacked and killed members of the Israeli team during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich (using their surviving victims as human shields during their ill-fated escape), an estimated eight hundred million people around the globe watched the unfolding tragedy. At the time, satellite TV transmission facilities were in place to broadcast the competitions in most parts of the world. But nearly thirty years later, a truly global television network, CNN, existed along with competitors that televised their programs across national borders and covered large regions of the world. Thus, more people watched the made-for-television disaster production "Attack on

America" live and in replays, than any other terrorist incident before. It is likely that the terrorist assaults on New York and Washington and their aftermath were the most watched made-for-television production ever.

From the perspective of those who produced this unprecedented terrorism as-breaking-news horror show, the broadcast was as successful as it could get. Whether the crime is a relatively inconsequential arson by an amateurish environmental group or a mass destruction by a network of professional terrorists, the perpetrators' media-related goals are the same ... Terrorists strive for attention, for recognition, and for respectability and legitimacy in their various target publics (Nacos 1994, 1996; O'Sullivan 1986). It has been argued that contemporary religious terrorists, unlike secular terrorists (such as the Marxists of the Red Brigade/Red Army or the nationalists of the Palestinian Liberation Front during the last decades of the Cold War), want nothing more than to lash out at the enemy and kill and damage indiscriminately to express their rage. But while all of these sentiments may well figure into the complex motives of group leaders and their followers, there is no doubt that their deeds are planned and executed with the mass media and their effects on the masses and governmental decision makers in mind. Unlike the typical secular terrorists, religious terrorists want to inflict the greatest possible pain, but they want a whole country, and in the case of international terrorism, the whole world, to see their act, to understand the roots of their rage, to solidify their esteem in their constituencies, and, perhaps, to win new supporters. Terrorists strive for attention, for recognition, and for respectability and legitimacy in their various target publics (Nacos 1994, 1996; O'Sullivan 1986). It has been argued that contemporary religious terrorists, unlike secular terrorists (such as the Marxists of the Red Brigade/Red Army or the nationalists of the Palestinian Liberation Front during the last decades of the Cold War), want nothing more than to lash out at the enemy and kill and damage indiscriminately to express their rage. But while all of these sentiments may well figure into the complex motives of group leaders and their followers, there is no doubt that their deeds are planned and executed with the mass media and their effects on the masses and governmental decision makers in mind. Unlike the typical secular terrorists, religious terrorists want to inflict the greatest possible pain, but they want a whole country, and in the case of international terrorism, the whole world, to see their act, to understand the roots of their rage, to solidify their esteem in their constituencies, and, perhaps, to win new supporters.

To be sure, publicity via the mass media is not an end in itself. Most terrorists have very specific short-term and/or long-term goals. It is not hard to determine the short-term and long-term objectives of those that planned and executed the suicide missions against the United States. Even without the benefit of a credible claim of responsibility, the mass media, decision makers, and the general public in the United States and abroad discussed the most likely motives for the unprecedented deeds. In the short term, the architects and perpetrators wanted to demonstrate the weaknesses of the world's only remaining superpower vis-à-vis determined terrorists, to frighten the American public, and to fuel perhaps a weakening of civil liberties and domestic unrest. No doubt, the long-term schemes targeted U.S. foreign policy, especially the American influence and presence in the Middle East and other regions with large Muslim populations. More important, as communications from Osama bin Laden and his organization revealed, those who decided on these particular terror attacks regarded the anticipated strikes by the United States as the beginning of a holy war between Muslims and infidels. Bin Laden, in a fax to Qatar-based al-Jazeera television, called the Muslims of Pakistan "the first line of defense ... against the new Jewish crusader campaign [that] is led by the biggest crusader Bush under the banner of the cross".¹⁵ The bin Laden statement that was widely publicized in the United States left no doubt that he purposely characterized the confrontation as a battle between Islam and "the new Christian-Jewish crusade".¹⁶

Whatever else their immediate and ultimate goals were, those who planned the attacks were well aware, as are most perpetrators of political violence, that the mass media of communication is central to furthering their publicity goals and even their political and religious objectives. Without the frightening images and the shocking reportage, the impact on America and the rest of the world wouldn't have been as immediate and intense as it was.

Notes

¹ Quoted here from Amy Harmon, "The search for intelligent life on the Internet", *New York Times*, 23 September 2001, Week in Review, 2.

² Michiko Kakutani, "Critic's Notebook: Struggling to find words for a horror beyond words", *New York Times*, 13 September 2001, E1.

³ "A day of terror: the voices", *New York Times*, 12 September 2001, 10.

⁴ "After the attacks: one man's account", *New York Times*, 15 September 2001, 10.

⁵ Cloud described his reaction as a guest on NBC's *Today* program on 12 September 2001.

⁶ The unidentified Canadian made the remark on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's program *The National*, 11 September 2001.

⁷ From *CNN Money Morning*, 14 September 2001.

⁸ John Updike, untitled contribution in "Talk of the town", *New Yorker*, 24 September 2001, 28.

⁹ Updike, 28.

¹⁰ Stockhausen's remarks and the reactions they caused in Germany were reported in "Attacks called great art", *New York Times*, 19 September 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/arts/music/19KARL.html> [accessed 1 April 2002].

¹¹ Lippmann explores the idea of environment and pseudo-environment (or reality and pseudo-media-reality), especially in chapters 1 and 6 of his book.

¹² Stockhausen is quoted here from Bill Carter and Felicity Barringer, "In patriotic times, dissent is muted", *New York Times*, 28 September 2001. According to the article, the Eastman School of Music's Ossia Ensemble cancelled a planned performance of Stockhausen's work "Stimmung" scheduled for early November at New York's Cooper Union.

¹³ Governor Pataki made these remarks on ABC News' *Nightline* on 14 September 2001.

¹⁴ Quoted here from Associated Press reporter Robert Jablon, "Hollywood think tank helping Army", http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20011009/us/attacks_hollywood_1.html [accessed 1 April 2002].

¹⁵ The statement was written in Arabic, but an English translation was carried by the wire services and widely publicized in the media. See, for example, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/633244.asp> [accessed 26 September 2001].

¹⁶ See <http://www.msnbc.com/news/633244.asp>

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