

Slavoj Žižek

Welcome to the Desert of the Real!

The ultimate American paranoid fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), with Jim Carrey playing the small-town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a twenty-four-hour permanent TV show: his hometown is constructed on a gigantic studio set, with cameras following him around the clock. Among its predecessors, it is worth mentioning Philip Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (1959), in which a hero living a modest daily life in a small idyllic Californian city of the late 1950s gradually realizes that the whole town is a fake staged to keep him satisfied. The underlying experience of *Time Out of Joint* and of *The Truman Show* is that the late capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyper-reality, in a way *irreal*, substanceless, deprived of the material inertia.

So it is not only that Hollywood stages a

The *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:2, Spring 2002.
Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press.

semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality—in the late capitalist consumerist society, “real social life” itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in “real” life as stage actors and extras. Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of the “real life” itself, its reversal into a spectral show. Among others, Christopher Isherwood gave expression to this unreality of the American daily life, exemplified in the motel room: “American motels are unreal! . . . they are deliberately designed to be unreal. . . . The Europeans hate us because we’ve retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate.” Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of the “sphere” is here literally realized, as the gigantic metal sphere that envelopes and isolates the entire city. Years ago, a series of science-fiction films like *Zardoz* or *Logan’s Run* forecasted today’s post-modern predicament by extending this fantasy to the community itself: the isolated group living an aseptic life in a secluded area longs for the experience of the real world of material decay.

The Wachowski brothers’ hit *Matrix* (1999) brought this logic to its climax: the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and coordinated by a gigantic megacomputer to which we are all attached; when the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into the “real reality,” he sees a desolate landscape littered with burned ruins—what remained of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader Morpheus utters the ironic greeting: “Welcome to the desert of the real.” Was it not something of the similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the “desert of the real”—to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the catastrophe big productions.

When we hear how the bombings were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened, one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the twentieth century, that of the *Titanic*: it was also a shock, but the space for it was already prepared in ideological fantasizing, since *Titanic* was the symbol of the might of the nineteenth-century industrial civilization. Does the same not hold for these bombings?

Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested—just

recall the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. The unthinkable that happened was thus the object of fantasy: in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise.

It is precisely now, when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe, that we should bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic coordinates that determine its perception. If there is any symbolism in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, it is not so much the old-fashioned notion of the “center of financial capitalism,” but rather the notion that the towers stood for the center of the *virtual* capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the bombings can be accounted for only against the background of the borderline that today separates the digitalized first world from the third world “desert of the Real.” It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction.

Is, consequently, Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the bombings, not the real-life counterpart of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the master-criminal in most of the James Bond films, who was involved in the acts of global destruction? What one should recall here is that the only place in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity is when James Bond penetrates the master-criminal’s secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York . . .). When the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory? And the function of Bond’s intervention, of course, is to explode in firecracks this site of production, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world with the “disappearing working class.” Is it not that, in the exploding Twin Towers, this violence directed at the threatening Outside turned back at us?

The safe sphere in which Americans live is experienced as under threat from the Outside of terrorist attackers who are ruthlessly self-sacrificing *and* cowards, cunningly intelligent *and* primitive barbarians. Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence. For the last five centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the “civilized” West was bought by the export of ruthless

violence and destruction into the “barbarian” Outside: the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings is much more symbolic than real. The United States just got a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Groznyy, from Rwanda and Congo to Sierra Leone. If one adds to the situation in New York snipers and gang rapes, one gets an idea about what Sarajevo was a decade ago.

It is when we watched on the TV screen the towers collapsing that it became possible to experience the falsity of the “reality TV shows”: even if these shows are “for real,” people still act in them—they simply play themselves. The standard disclaimer in a novel (“Characters in this text are a fiction. Any resemblance with real-life characters is purely contingent”) holds also for the participants of the reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves. Of course, the “return to the real” can be given different twists: rightist commentators like George Will immediately proclaimed the end of the American “holiday from history”—the impact of reality shattering the isolated tower of the liberal tolerant attitude and the Cultural Studies focus on textuality. Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world . . . However, *whom* to strike? Whatever the response, it will never hit the *right* target, bringing us full satisfaction. The ridicule of America attacking Afghanistan cannot but strike the eye: if the greatest power in the world will destroy one of the poorest countries in which peasants barely survive on barren hills, will this not be the ultimate case of the impotent acting out?

There is a partial truth in the notion of the “clash of civilizations” attested here—witness the surprise of the average American: “How is it possible that these people have such a disregard for their own lives?” Does not this surprise reveal the rather sad fact that we, in the first world countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one’s life?

When, after the bombings, even the Taliban foreign minister said that he can “feel the pain” of the American children, did he not thereby confirm the hegemonic ideological role of this Bill Clinton trademark phrase? And the notion of America as a safe haven, of course, is also a fantasy: when a New Yorker commented on how, after the bombings, one can no longer walk safely on the city’s streets, the irony of it was that, well before the

bombings, the streets of New York were well-known for their dangers. If anything, the bombings gave rise to a new sense of solidarity, with the scenes of young African Americans helping an old Jewish gentleman to cross the street, scenes unimaginable before the attacks.

In the days immediately following the bombings, it is as if we dwell in the unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact, like in those brief moments after we are deeply cut and before the full extent of the pain strikes us: it remains to be seen how the events will be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts they will be evoked to justify. Even here, in these moments of utmost tension, this link is not automatic but contingent. There are already the first bad omens; the day after the bombing, I got a message from the editor of a journal in which a longer text of mine on Lenin was about to be published. The editor told me that they decided to postpone its publication. They considered it inopportune to publish a text on Lenin immediately after the attacks. Does this not point toward the ominous ideological rearticulations that will follow?

We don't yet know what consequences in economy, ideology, politics, war this event will have, but one thing is sure: the United States, which, till now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing this kind of thing only from the safe distance of the TV screen, is now directly involved. So the alternative is, Will Americans decide to fortify further their "sphere," or will they risk stepping out of it?

Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the attitude, "Why should this happen to us? Things like this don't happen *here!*"—leading to more aggression toward the threatening Outside, in short: to a paranoid acting out—or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival into the Real world, making the long-overdue move from "Things like this should not happen *here!*" to "Things like this should not happen *anywhere!*" America's "holiday from history" was a fake: America's peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere. Therein resides the true lesson of the bombings.

Copyright of South Atlantic Quarterly is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.