

Ulrich Sollmann

"The Message is the Bomb (11. 9. 2001)" or The Power of Fear

"Die Botschaft ist die Bombe"

Zusammenfassung Die gnadenlose Unmittelbarkeit des Ereignisses 11. 9. 2001 läßt die Menschen weltweit ins Bodenlose ihrer Affekte stürzen. Viele spüren kein Sicherheitsgefühl mehr in der eigenen Identität. Statt dessen entsteht durch die weltweit gleichzeitig gezeigten Fernsehbilder zum ersten Mal in der Geschichte ein globaler Affekt in Echtzeit. Das Ereignis hat die Menschen noch heute im Griff und wirbelt Information und Affekte durcheinander.

Das Fernsehen als Erfüllungsgehilfe eines zynischen Plans der Terroristen potenziert das Grauen und ist selbst Geisel der Terroristen. Die Botschaft ist die Bombe und die Botschaft heißt Angst. Der Terror hat nicht den Menschen, sondern gerade seine Aufmerksamkeit zum Ziel. Terrorismus ist am 11. 9. 2001 also primär eine „Kommunikationsstrategie“.

Die Welt trennt sich in „Gut und Böse“. Globalisierung, Narzissmus im Westen und Selbst-Zerstörung in der Rolle der Selbstmord-Attentäter sind verschiedene Facetten ein und des selben narzisstischen Größenelbst. Dieses trägt Züge kindlicher Allmachtsphantasien, dient der Selbst-Täuschung, um Gefühle von Kleinheit, Ohnmacht und Hilflosigkeit durch Omnipotenzgefühle abzuwehren. Größenwahn, Selbstentwertung und Selbstzerstörung/Selbst-Tötung unterscheiden sich als Als-ob-Identitäten im Osten und im Westen nicht groß voneinander.

Schlüsselwörter:

11. 9. 2001; globaler Affekt in Echtheit; Medien; innerseelische Sicherheit; Angst; Globalisierung; Narzissmus; Terrorismus als „Kommunikationsstrategie“; Größenwahn; Selbstentwertung; Selbst-Tötung; Identitätskrise.

Dread overwhelms me at the same time as the awakening sensation-seeking desire for the chance to experience a new-age media-spectacle. I grip the telephone tighter than usual, hear the flustered voices of my colleagues telling me breathlessly about the horrendous airplane disaster in New York.

An disaster?

While I listen to the details, a latent mistrust indicates the beginning of a ghastly discovery. I'm in my office and after a split-second yet eternal pause I decide to interrupt my work to follow the tempting call of this magical fascination. I feel like two people – cut into two people, each of whom follows his own call with a clear alertness and conviction. At the same time as calmly turning off the various electronic devices and machines in the office (am I already so subtly convinced that it might turn out to be a long vigil in front of the television), I lust for the first television pictures. From my outward appearance, it's impossible to notice my agitation and excitement. But within me, I feel the faltering floor, the platform from which, later, I should fall into the bottomless pit of my emotions. Slowly, step by step, I go up to our apartment, as if trying to build up courage that it will not turn out as badly as the depth of my emotions indicate. I am alone.

Then come the pictures. No commentary. The pictures which hurl me into the turbulence of my emotions. Repeatedly, the same pictures, with flashbacks, so that it's impossible to grasp what's happening at this very moment. Spellbound? No! More like hypnotised by the

hunger/greed for that which is terrible, indescribable.

I lose all feeling for beginning and end. I see the pictures and can no longer differentiate between the past and the present. I see the pictures as if they were excerpts from a Hollywood-Film. One of those action-movies that a saturated audience necessitates in order to awaken the thrill that one needs in the monotony of daily life. An everyday life, that one assumes to be real life.

I cannot turn away – even my rash attempts to put an end to this nightmare fail as I zap through the different channels in the hope of convincing myself that everything isn't as bad as it seems... in the hope of finding another programme on another channel.

Yet the same pictures are everywhere. Fulfilling my expectations, the aircrafts bore without a sound, like ghosts, into the towers. Again and again. It is through this repetition that I understand what is happening – my emotions mercilessly show me the eternity of the present.

Again and again, the same pictures. The same attacks, again and again. Each channel uses the same camera position. In the hope of assuming different perspectives from the various channels, of losing myself in the events and gaining a distance to my own self, I lose connection to a certain capability, which is usually so important to me. The capability to feel and think and remember, and thus to be able to think ahead. I catch

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myself being everywhere at the same time: the viewer in front of my television, the passenger of one of the aircrafts, an inhabitant of New York fleeing wide eyed in horror from the debris of the collapsed twin towers, whirling through the air,

I have lost all sense of time. I can barely differentiate between today and yesterday, between today and tomorrow. Fragments of a remembered past whirl up a rage of an otherwise unknown sense of guilt within me.

While I fall headlong through the merciless immediacy of these events into the gaping hole of the future – a hole, born from the inexplicable feelings of guilt and driven by the current emotions to attain apocalyptic traits. These apocalyptic traits turn into a seemingly friendly companion, as I see the ghostly bodies of people who, in the depths of despair, throw themselves from the windows to their deaths, to merciless deliverance. I know, that it isn't me that is falling. I know that, instead, I succumb to interminable dying. Suddenly I understand the secret recipe of Hollywood action-films, the secret of films which play with the cauldron of our emotions. Banished into our emotions, we suffer the same feelings as the film-victims, together with them. Supported by subtle camera-work, we slip into the clothes of the perpetrator.

I see the ghostly bodies. I know that these people are about to jump and I hope that the television camera will zoom closer still. I want to see how they jump, and at the same time am disgusted that I succumb to my perverse desire.

I am ashamed. I am ashamed of myself and curse myself through the imagined eyes of others. The thought alone, exposes me to a virtual public, that experiences me as a participant in this media-event. The others, that is every other virtual participant in this event, though not present, sees through and loathes my secret voyeurism.

I am also one of the "others".

I feel the fear of annihilation, that develops when others point their fingers.

It seems as if I no longer have any limits. It seems as if I no longer have any confidence in my own identity. At the same time as being overwhelmed by my craving, I am aware of the unfolding calamity for the people who throw themselves into the void in absolute

despair. For a split second, I think that I catch the look of speechless terror on the faces of the people precipitating downwards.

They seem to be looking directly into my eyes. Their screams are silent. Our eyes meet.

Some lose themselves in death. Others, like me, dissolve in life.

I feel like I have been caught red-handed, although we have never met – I feel my voyeurism unmasked, which, like self-denudation, controls me. Suddenly I want to hide under the cloak of my own shame and protect myself from the demons of my own emotions.

I stare at the screen: at the still images, at the images in motion, at the repeating images. I lose any stable point of reference that could help me to understand what is happening before my very eyes or what is happening within me. What I see and what I feel has taken control of me with the explosive force of an immediate experience. I could simply turn off the television, I think to myself, in order to return to my work in the office. But when I feel the trembling within me again, the extreme tension which has robbed me of myself, I feel like a voyeur one moment and like a human being the next, who throws himself into the abyss, overwhelmed by the inner agony before being dashed to pieces upon impact with the ground. One moment, I feel sympathy with the people who flee from the inferno. Another moment, I fancy that I am in the cockpit of the second aircraft, and imagine the intoxication of being the bomb itself. My body is the bomb.

This event has me in its stranglehold. In the turbulence of my concentration, information and emotions whirl about in disarray. Before I even manage to contemplate a thought, I realise that it is fully interchangeable. It takes wing before I can grasp it. Worst of all, I no longer have the use of my own thoughts. They either exist meaningless and indistinguishable, one beside the other, or split into pieces through the explosive force of the next thoughts. Or other thoughts insert themselves like an inner lining between the television images and myself, between silent approaching aircrafts and my knowledge that I already know what is about to happen – that what is about to happen has in fact just happened. I remember my horror and can, even today remem-

ber it, as the aircraft is about to bore into the second tower, as it has done countless times in the last minutes.

The images alternate, the incident remains the same. One moment I see an aircraft or a collapsing tower. Another moment, I see the sheer horror in the faces of the people.

I sit frozen in front of my television, incapable of moving at all. My senses and my mind are alert while the rest of my body resembles a empty shell – drugged, lifeless.

New information about the attack on the Pentagon. New information about potential assassins expands my yearning emotional horizon with the speed of a rapid new zoom-setting. The cognitive horizon is broader. I see more and make connections between the events: between the events and the first fragmented commentaries. And all the while my panic transforms itself into an expanding limitless fear. I have lost all sense of time. I want to obliterate everything that I have seen and experienced – and long for a Hollywood action-film.

There is no happy ending. The real-world is different. Only the film in which I am acting remains the same – the film of life – the film that the scripts of Hollywood not only copy but refine into a merciless reality.

Why am I telling you this?

The attacks of 11. 9. 2001 caught the world fully unprepared. "Part of our view of the world collapsed, and as yet, no new view shows the way into the future". By sucking the people into its trajectory through the mute pictures, television, the "simultaneous medium of world-events", spread the incident in the blink of an eye. By magnifying the horror, television became a tool of a cynical plan and turned itself into a hostage of the terrorists.

The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on the 11. 9. 2001 rocked the world and damaged the souls of countless people. Everyone world-wide could participate live in this terror-scenario through the terrible events broadcast over television and radio. At the same time this scenario spread like a conflagration into the private sphere (in

« The message is the bomb (11. 9. 2001) » ou le pouvoir de la peur

Résumé L'inexorable brutalité des événements du 11 septembre 2001 a précipité de nombreux habitants de notre planète dans l'abîme de leurs émotions. Nombreux sont ceux qui ne se sentent plus en sécurité dans leur propre identité. Pour la première fois de l'histoire, un affect élémentaire a été ressenti partout en temps réel, grâce à la télévision. Cette expérience continue aujourd'hui encore à hanter l'individu et à lui faire confondre information et émotion.

La télévision collabore à la mise en place du plan cynique des terroristes en démultipliant l'horreur – les médias sont devenus les otages de la terreur. Le message est la bombe et ce message s'appelle la peur. La terreur ne vise pas les hommes en soi, elle vise à attirer l'attention. Le 11 septembre 2001, le terrorisme a

été avant tout une « stratégie de communication ». Le monde s'est scindé, « le bien contre le mal ».

La globalisation, le narcissisme qui domine le monde occidental et l'autodestruction implicite à l'action des auteurs de l'attentat suicide constituent les différentes facettes du même Soi narcissique victime de sa grandiosité. Ce Soi est possédé par des fantasmes enfantins de toute-puissance ; il permet à l'individu de vivre dans l'illusion de l'omnipotence pour s'éviter de subir des sentiments d'infériorité, d'impuissance et de faiblesse. La construction d'une identité-comme-si par la folie des grandeurs, l'autodépréciation et l'autodestruction est finalement très semblable des deux côtés, Orient et Occident.

a survey conducted in September 2001, 86% of Germans stated that they were afraid). As if unified in one outcry, the inhabitants of the United States sought refuge under the cover of intense patriotism while the Islamic Fundamentalists sought unity through the message and interpretation of the Koran. And in the blink of an eyelid, the world was divided into "Good and Evil". Our planet had never before experienced such a global, media transmitted emotion live and simultaneously.

In the meanwhile the war in Afghanistan is already history. The number of reconnaissance flights over Somalia are increasing. The tense relationship between Israel and Palestine confronts world-politics with a sheer insolvable task. The war in Iraq is imminent.

The world is falling apart. Mankind is losing its inner emotional security. Both the trusted values and the common ways of interpreting the world, society and man have proven a failure. Everywhere. In the west and in the east. This is not only since 11. 9. 01.

The message is the bomb and "it is the global world itself which resists globalisation".

That, which in the course of globalisation, cultural integration and multimedia has been elevated into a worthwhile goal world-wide has turned into a horror scenario through the events of 11th September 2001. The opening of borders, the global exchange of goods and opinions, the closer contact between people in this "global village" also leads to a loss of ties. Through the events of 11. 9. 2001 and the flood of emotions, this loss unsettles, shakes, or even destroys the sense of security

in one's own identity within ones own personal limits. As victims of this loss of boundaries, they raise their defences in a radical manner in the same way as the terrorist-pilots and the suicide-attackers in Israel. Others, in the west, fall wordlessly into the narcissic emptiness of lack of emotions. And while some, for the purpose of a rapacious capitalism, find justification in the very idea of globalisation for becoming active economically, aggressively or as a global police – others are fundamentally opposed to the very process of globalisation and emotional limitlessness. And in the meanwhile the lines of demarcation between the religions, cultures and opinion-groups harden.

"Globalisation cannot be undone. What has changed, however, is that the most extreme power that one can imagine has now found an equivalent, a type of antibody as radical as itself".

What caused the terrible attacks to happen? What motivates people to join radical terrorist organisations? How should we interpret the unmistakable radical return to patriotism in the USA – a patriotism which has already led to curtailments in basic human rights and which corresponds to a free-ticket for immediate war. For immediate war, everywhere.

"The message is the bomb" (FAZ) and on 11. 9. 2001 we have no choice but to observe and experience. The goal of these acts of terror is not the people themselves but their attention. "The terrorists are not interested in the actual destructive effect of their actions. These are merely tools to communicate a message to a large number of people. Terrorism is,

above all, a 'Communication Strategy'".

What counts, is the message – it ignites and when it explodes, we should take notice.

On the 11th of September 2001, the images on television were broadcast – for minutes, hours, days. Without commentary. And without the usual interruptions from advertisements – a practice unknown on television. Until then, there had always been an organised visual production-process. However, this time, and for the first time, a war took place, live, on the medial stage. "The journalistic sequence of events, and not the generals are directing the dramatic process". People stared spellbound at the screen. There was total silence. Everyone was at a loss for words as the cameras zoomed in on the tower.

Shock, speechlessness, horror – everywhere. Even the journalists. Due to the global (medial) network it was absolutely impossible to establish any perspective to the experienced images. Both externally and internally. Yet perspective is bitterly needed. We need speech, we need knowledge and information in order to find a way out of this helpless fear, out of the shock, out of the anger.

The message is the bomb because "images, through their intensity and power last longer than words".

"Through the infernal crash of the towers, the collapse – both symbolical and real – of our concept of what is imaginable, the apocalypse of that which is conceivable was achieved. For a second, there are only pictures, no simultaneous commentary". People were left alone with the incident, with

the continuous flow of pictures. They found a counterpart to their inner speechlessness in the journalists' struggle to find words – a speechlessness at the mercy of the power of the emotions.

The incident on 11. 9. 2001 shows clearly that things in this world come as a surprise, an unforeseeable phenomena and, ultimately, like a myth, cannot be understood. The west and science believe, particularly in recent years and with the help, for example, of the concepts of systems-theory, that they have sufficient understanding of complexity. However, the incident on 11. 9. 2001 shows us that we are fully exposed to the experience of the original force of induced phenomena, of surprising incidents and that we need to learn to deal with them, with the ambiguity – to learn to bear the internal tension.

Why am I telling you all this? Because supremacy causes fear and fear demoralises. World-wide

Since the 11th September 2001, the very thing which some people praised as absolute progress seems now to be the cause, the engine, the driving force of self-destruction. Globalisation, with its unmasked and often forbidden dissolution of boundaries and differences, together with its blending of different social and cultural processes has now gained traits of a grandiose-self. Everything seems possible. Everything seems controllable. Everything has to be acceptable! Both in the east and the west. Both for them and for me.

However, for a long time it has become clear – through experiences in economics and politics, through cultural exchange and in direct contact between people – that this undertaking, a childish fantasy of omnipotence, is on a par with self-deception. Mergers in the business world often fail after two years. Enormous companies collapse. The cul-

tural integration of foreigners, in the sense of cultural blending, often proves to be more difficult than predicted. And in recent years, dialogue in cultural/ethnic areas of tension is mutating into radical demarcation-conflicts (the Balkan, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan etc.), which in part are fought with medieval methods.

Through the self-deception of our own grandiose-self, feelings of insignificance, powerlessness and helplessness are averted with feelings of omnipotence. These manifest themselves either in the exaggerated show of wealth, luxury and western values and political, economic and military power and control or in religious fundamentalist fanaticism. Or in suicide-attacks. Or in the terrorism of 11. 9. 2001.

Delusions of grandeur and self-depreciation are two sides of one and the same coin. Both lead to self-destruction: to self-denial in the west, to suicide in the east. Identity multiplies in the west into pseudo-identities of occidental culture whilst the identity of Islamic fundamentalists dissolves in the spiritual expression of the Koran.

The message is the bomb because there is nothing worse than the realisation that one perceives nothing – understands nothing.

For the first time in the history of the world, the USA and the west are fighting an invisible enemy, who is omnipresent, intangible and yet existent. Bin Laden, for example, appears as a chimera, as a real and a symbolic enemy – like a virtual spectre, whose tracks are conscientiously and lustfully identified, without knowing if he really is still alive. In the meanwhile Anthrax, the invisible enemy, is causing a “flash-epidemic” and will become a further virtual threat, as millions of people in Europe and the USA suddenly mistrust every letter. Not only German comedians but also the American government said, only days after the attack, that Bin Laden – beard shaven and in an elegant suit – was

living in New York in order to enjoy his success in-situ.

Due to the events after 11. 9. 2001, people and society have fallen headlong into an identity-crisis. “Nothing is the same as before”. In September 2001, the bible headed the best-seller list in the UK and even in December 2001, German G.P.'s stated that over 50% of patients made a connection between their ailments – diffuse, free-floating fears – and the events following 11. 9. 2001. Meanwhile, already on 12. 9. 2001, politicians announced: “everything under control”. Citizens need not be afraid. Alternatively, they compensated for their own fear and the national fear, in the same way as President Bush, by differentiating between person and people. Between “Good” and “Evil”.

The message is the bomb and the message is called fear.

“I am like a live bomb” says the young man who sits opposite me during a first consultation approximately one year prior to 11. 9. 2001. He always had the feeling that he didn't exist. And at the same time he cries, mute, without visible tears – wretched in his isolation, although he doesn't want do anyone any harm.

He is frightened of the dark. The scream that he now feels within him shouldn't be there – since, if he were to scream, he would no longer exist.

The young man barely shows anything. His faith in God has always helped him to hide from himself his shame about his inability to be “right”. And yet, with his rigid sexual compulsions (the reason why he came to me for therapy), he seems so strangely and radically opposed to himself.

It is like a gradual potential suicide, through which he wishes to protect himself from his own hatred for God – he mentions this tersely, casually but knowingly.

He is afraid in the darkness of solitude. And yet, it is the darkness itself which enables him to feel anything at all.