

Editor's Column: 11 September 2001

THE GENERAL FRUITLESSNESS OF WRITING IN THE AFTER-math of a disaster is compounded for me by the belatedness with respect to the events of 11 September forced on me by production schedules and their insensitive deadlines. As deadlines go, this one is exceedingly harsh, for I must comply with it after watching for two days take after numbing take of those airplanes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. One in particular haunts me, aptly described by the photographer that filmed it as a “bad special effects” sequence: the airplane seems to go through the wall of the second tower, to be absorbed by it, almost as if the building had sucked it in. For a second, time is suspended, and then the fireball appears, but it bears no resemblance to the way Hollywood has taught us to conceive such events. And all this is happening just a few blocks from the building where the MLA resides; where the staff that produces these pages works; the place at which this text must finally arrive. I have never been as acutely conscious as I am now of the temporal distance between when I *write* something and when it is *read*: Are you, the reader, weary of hearing about events that have by now receded into the past? Has some other attack occurred? Am *I* still alive as you read this?

“Mobile Citizens, Media States.” Can anyone doubt that there is a perverse justice in this world? How apt that this special topic is being prepared in the wake of the disaster. This issue addresses the implications for individuals and state institutions of the configuration and process that we call globalization; some of the contributions are especially concerned with the place that we as academics in mostly American institutions occupy in that order of things. Now we have compelling new evidence to contemplate when answering those concerns. Above all, we should understand—

as the contributors to this issue clearly do—that our having the prerogative to consider how and under what circumstances we participate in this global configuration is already a telling symptom.

To create one enormous market, we in the United States have led in the superimposition on the world of a network for the unhindered displacement of people and information in all directions and times, but we marvel when some of the terror that circulates around the globe eventually finds its way to us. Why should we be astounded when we are visited by the world's universal commodity—armed violence? We are all now truly global citizens, inasmuch as the terror that has been and continues to be the daily lot of much of the rest of humanity has now touched the country that had not partaken of it because of an outrageous good luck that had to run its course. We are now compelled to confront, at the hour of its loss, the luxury we have had of not being aware of the luxury in which we lived.

We espouse globalization but only of those aspects of our lives that will most likely remain for some time to come beyond the reach of the societies to which we recommend it as a desideratum. We do not stop to consider that the demands we place on their fragile economies if they are to join this new order of things will tear those societies apart before any benefits accrue to them. In the years between the end of World War II and the demise of the Soviet Union, we painstakingly and at times violently taught the world to look at reality through our Manichaeic eyes. We forsook principle, nuance, and complexity for the sake of ideological and political expediency. Now proponents of a worldview that finds its strength and self-legitimacy in an equally Manichaeic conception of reality have presented their calling card, and we call them fanatics, even if in a not-too-distant past we cultivated their fanaticism for our own world-historical purposes. The monstrous matrix out of which the unendurable events of 11 September arose could only exist as a composite of forces that are all vitiated individually as well as in their misbegotten combination. Just as

there is a political unconscious whose existence acknowledges the dread of retribution seething below every unequal social arrangement, there is a rapidly filling ledger of credits and debits for this universal configuration that we call globalization. And, I beseech you, do not defile the dead by misconstruing my words to say that we brought this misery on ourselves.

The front page of a local alternative newspaper in Philadelphia, the city in which I live, has a headline emblazoned across an oversized photograph of the burning towers: "Nothing Will Ever Be the Same." The nightmarish quality of this statement arises from its absence of nostalgia; the phrase is directed to the future in all its potential dreadfulness. As editor I must attempt to imagine how you will read the articles in this issue on Mobile Citizens, Media States from within the conceptual framework of such a future. Of course, I read these texts much earlier, but trying to envision how you will receive them in the aftermath of the events of 11 September puts in check the perfected aspect of my previous reading. Encountering them again from within that *after* which we all now share, I realize that they do not say what I remember them saying or that they say much more than what I recollect—they speak now in a different voice and in an altogether different register. I am struck by something that was clearly already there but that I could not hear or see *before*. All thought after a traumatic event engages to some extent in prolepsis to allow the work of mourning to begin. Yet because these articles revolve in one way or another around the anxieties, imbalances, and opportunities generated by globalization, in them prolepsis becomes outright prophecy instead.

For there are in these texts shimmerings—some of them inconsequential, others disturbing and poignant—that now read to me as prophecies of the disaster. It is as if in these passages the texts evinced their attunement to that unconscious reservoir of violence and despair about globalization to which I referred earlier, but an

attunement now cathected with the singularity of the events of 11 September. This is, of course, an effect of reading after the disaster. But do we have the option of not reading *after* anymore?

June 21st 1995. If a date is needed for the start of the New Nomadic Age, this is as good as any. Late that afternoon, at Hakodate in Japan, Flight No. ANA857 was stalled on the local airport runway. The reason—a hijack. In the following 16 hours, twelve phone calls from passengers using their mobile phones told police that the hijacker was aged 22–30, that he wore sunglasses, jeans and white sneakers, that he was on the upper floor of the aircraft and that he appeared to be lightly armed. Acting on this information, police stormed the plane and arrested the hijacker without ill effects except that a stewardess was slightly injured and one of the passengers, pop singer Tokiko Kato, complained of being “worn out and wanting to sleep.” There could be no better example of the power of one of the early tools of the New Nomadic Age—the mobile telephone—to alter events.

(Makimoto and Manners, qtd. in Kaplan)

The scraps and flashes that arrive in moments of drama and tension from the otherwise invisible corners of the globe are temporary interruptions that refuse to fit into the unfolding of our lives. Any narrative, any accounting of the world, willing to receive and offer hospitality to a disturbance that uproots the *domus* and that invites us not to feel at home at home (Adorno) renders the universal story many of us think we are living more localized, particular. In the poetical power of language to reconfigure space in a diverse understanding of location and identity, home is made a more open-ended and vulnerable habitat.

(Chambers)

Nonetheless, the same technologies that enable global distribution of media (satellite, cellular, Internet, and so on) are also increasingly available to media activists.

(Rodowick)

As geography becomes less and less a barrier to communication and movement, cultures become more exposed to one another. This pro-

duces an intricate field of tensions, creolizing not only identity but also communities, whose active reception and use of global media become novel and unpredictable. (Rodowick)

At the bottom of the *New Yorker* cartoon, three boxes offer three possible facts about the people who made your shirt. In the middle there is an exaggerated clarity: they “earned three cents an hour.” To the left, however, there is ambiguity: they “probably have dysentery or diphtheria or worse.” This could be another sign of their misery but could also be a reason for our anxiety and disgust (yuck, germs on my shirt!). And to the right is more ambiguity: they “hate your stupid Yankee guts.” To which the likely American response is, “In that case, too bad for them.”

(Robbins)

The state, the logic of capital, the languages of hegemony are frequently blocked, deviated, and subverted when, for example, contingent identities pass through the modem and down the phone line, as the latest musical mix is transmitted from Kingston to London and then on to New York for further elaboration [. . .].

(Chambers)

Eco draws free and easy connections between a medieval Europe “furrowed by pilgrimage routes” and “our skies furrowed by air routes”; between millennial expectations in the two epochs; and between two social conditions of “insecurity,” the early period seen as plagued by the haphazard attacks of roving bands of marauder-crusaders and the contemporary world seen as beset by hijackings and terrorist bombings.

(Apter)

Looking is not acting, in Sarajevo or in New York, and for Cohen the diffusion of images goes hand in hand with a more disturbing dispersion or evisceration of the conditions of action: lost are centrality, authority, borders and clear distinctions, principles, and much more.

(Keenan)

Thinking about the images at hand, we could even say that what defines the public is the pos-

sibility of being a target and of being missed.
(Keenan)

Looking back at history compels us to notice the short-term appeal to drama and the long-term inaccuracy of the headline “Nothing Will Ever Be the Same”: as a species we have endured and recovered historically from far worse. But we must stop for a moment at each human-made tragedy and memorialize it, even in the knowledge that this, too, shall pass. I am reminded of the words of the Cuban writer José Lezama Lima, who, referring to a different tragedy—a private as opposed to a collective apocalypse—proposes that an event of the magnitude of what we have experienced “engenders a darkness that has to be redeemed through the transfiguration exhaled by the habit of attempting that which is most difficult” (276; my trans.). For me, the most difficult task at this

moment is to read the articles in this issue with the detachment of the scholar, to weigh the relative merits of their positions and their intelligent contributions to the debates about globalization. To be sure, such engagement is possible, for they are important statements in their own right. But for me, for now, mourning imposes another way of reading these texts, one that engenders in me simultaneously a humbling surprise and a terrible self-reproach: how could I not allow myself before to hear in them the roar, the deafening roar, of what was about to come?

Carlos J. Alonso

WORK CITED

Lezama Lima, José. *Paradiso*. México: Era, 1973.