

Paul Virilio

The Media Coup d'Etat*

Disillusioned, on the night of the spectacular victory of FORZA ITALIA and its allies, one Italian had this to say: "Once upon a time you had to go and vote holding your nose. Soon, with Berlusconi in power, you'll have to go and vote with your eyes shut!"

It would be hard to better describe the event that has just taken place in Italy, an event that has shone new light on the operation conducted for years now by Judge Antonio Di Pietro in the name of the fight against corruption and which has led today to the coming to power not only of a POSTFASCIST party, that of Gianfranco Fini, but also of a POSTPOLITICAL party, that of Silvio Berlusconi... As though the "ethic cleansing" of the Italian political class had only ever served to justify the first *coup d'état by the media* in the history of Europe.

Manipulated, if not by an excess of justice, which always leads to injustice, then at least by the excessive proceedings involved in operation MANI PULITE, or Clean Hands, the Italian electorate has suddenly plummeted with eyes shut into the abyss opened by the media entrepreneur. This has created a new kind of alternative, one no longer between the parliamentary left and right, but now between *politics* and the *media*, the attractions of the small screen in future prevailing not only over the written word and the necessity for some kind of political program, but also over opinion polls, with the AUDIMAT, or T.V. ratings device, making a sensational entrance on the stage of republican legality: the genius of the orator bowing out before the telegeny of the male or female Forza Italia candidate.

Even so, can we talk of the introduction into politics of a sort of *comparative advertising*, a regime of free competition whereby supporters of the small screen would win the day over those of the press and the parliamentary project? Comparisons are odious, as we all know, and the event has consequences too serious for us to be satisfied with considerations so partial—in both senses of the term.

Italy has in fact always been in the avant-garde in the realms of artistic or political REPRESENTATION. From the Quattrocento to bel canto, via baroque architecture and the cinema, the Italian peninsula has been the cultural laboratory of Europe. Against all reason, Italy is, was and ever will be FUTURIST. But when we already know beforehand the congenital relationship that exists between that movement and FASCISM, the coming to power of the "Special Freedom Zone" is scarcely reassuring for the future of the continent, at the precise moment when it is threatened by the fatal aftermath of *ethnic cleansing* in ex-Yugoslavia.

Let's take a look now at the warning signs that precluded this event in Italian politics. Without going back as far as Watergate and the resignation of the late President Nixon, the first president of the United States to be forced to step down by a vast media campaign led by the *Washington Post*, all we need do is examine, however briefly, the role of magnate Ross Perot during the American presidential campaign of 1992 to see that what was in play there was already the emergence of a *cathodic democracy* in which the art of the opinion poll would finally be assimilated to the measurement of audiovisual audience response, indeed, to an initial virtual vote, was already in play.

But America was still not quite ready and the career of one George Bush, basking in the glory of his victory in the Gulf War, did not permit our exotic candidate to be evenly matched with his two political opponents... Hence Perot's premature withdrawal.

As you will remark, in its preliminary campaign for a *data coup d'etat*, 1 the media cannot resist a certain kind of lynching, a moral discrediting of the political class in place—at least in those countries where economic strength, allied to democratic traditions, still manages to make republican institutions exceptionally stable. A sort of *implicit conspiracy* is then necessarily established between the powers of justice and the fourth estate of mass information, as though the press, in the past, and the audiovisual media, today, ensured the role of the public enquiry not by investigating this or that suspect anymore (Nixon one day, Clinton the next with the Whitewater affair...), but by investigating the political class as a whole.

A fatal couple thus forms between the liberating power of the media to create scandal and everyday Anglo-Saxon puritanism, the active entry of cameras into assemblies and courts clearly not being foreign to such attempts, now endlessly repeated, to disqualify the nation's elected representatives in the name of some fight against corruption in which the ideality of a *politically correct* justice system can then no longer be clearly distinguished from the optically correct character conferred on it by its representation on television and by the producers responsible for this.

Indeed, how can we fail to notice that the mass media today play a major role *during* presidential elections on the American continent as a whole, as much as on the subcontinent? Just look at the role of TV GLOBO on the occasion of the turbulent election of Fernando Collor.

With 80 percent of the national audience and thousands of employees, this great *politico-communications* complex, where *the news is directly designed by the station's marketing department*, represents something quite other than a simple organ of one nation's "democratic freedom of expression"!

And yet, the most disturbing aspect of the sudden "Americanization" of electoral campaigns in southern Europe is in the end Silvio Berlusconi's success with young Italians: *more than half the 18-25 age group voted for the triumvirate of the "Special Freedom Zone"*, six million of them enlisted to support Forza Italia, the Lombardy League, and the fascists of Gianfranco Fini.

Massively trained by private television, video games, and the hyperviolent variety shows of an American "culture" of which Italy has always shown itself to be fond, the lost continent of the young Latin generation, subject to unemployment and a lost inheritance, is now heading for the rocks of a fundamentally transpolitical despair. And this at the precise moment that, on the other side of the Adriatic, their counterparts are in the throes of a war in which rock fans and other football supporters of teams from Belgrade and elsewhere have turned into snipers or torturers in the pay of the "civil war lords".

"Anyone who doesn't like television doesn't like America," Silvio Berlusconi declared at the opening of his electoral campaign. He was not bawling out the old militants of the communist party so much as those striving to keep the fourth estate within the legal bounds of parliamentary democracy.

Are we about to see, over the whole of southern Europe, including Spain, as we saw not long ago in the subcontinent of America, the disastrous coupling of Latin "populism" and Anglo-Saxon "liberalism", Latin American political culture spreading beyond the Atlantic to the Old Continent of Europe?

At the very moment when everyone is crowing about the merits of the future "electronic highways" of information technology launched by American Vice-President Al Gore—a project that takes up the project of our unhappy presidential candidate, Ross Perot, feature for feature—we would perhaps do well to worry. Especially as Judge Di Pietro, an indirect partner in the electoral success of the Berlusconi team, has himself just scored a first as far as any *data coup d'état* goes by not only introducing a camera into the courtroom but a computer as well, on the occasion of the Tangentopoli trial that was just wound up in Milan. Satisfied with his *coup d'éclat*, or shot of glamour, the judge fired at journalists present: "*This is the entry of the MULTIMEDIA into the realm of law!*"²

Faced with the strange delay in Berlusconi's investiture, we might also wonder if Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Republic of Italy, did not hesitate to accept responsibility for conferring executive power on a man who holds a monopoly on information. We in France should also question the future direction of our Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés (National Committee on Information Technology and Civil Liberties). If we do not, how can we lastingly arm ourselves against the major danger of an immediate and fatal confusion between the powers and interests of the State and those of the multimedia enterprise?

"To command, you must first of all speak to the eyes", Napoleon Bonaparte warned in the days when Claude Chappe's optical telegraph could send only ciphered messages and when, in spite of everything, the coup d'Etat relied on the grenadiers of the Guard alone.

Today, when the Revolution no longer begins with the storming of the Winter Palace but with the storming of radio stations or television studios, as recently in Moscow and Budapest, how can we turn a blind eye to the transalpine political drama?

"Take his hands, look into his eyes, *storm his sight!*", as Paul Eluard advised the victor, reworking the Little Corporal's injunction.

If to intimate an order is thus to intimidate a person's gaze, the development of the future tools of mass communication (audiovisual, computers...) will soon help to promote, with the art of commanding at a distance, an art of a sort of *socio-political cybernetics* against which no lasting resistance will be able to be organized since the very nature of the teletechnologies of the screen opposes storage as memory and so any sharing of thought... *The art of remote control* being of the order of the conditioned reflex but never of any shared democratic "wisdom".

Rather than shifting onto the image the opprobrium that now pits *the written word against the screen*, we would be better off trying to define the amazing power of the monitor, this cathode ray tube terminal whose power lies in the absolute speed of delivery of images and messages and no longer in the spatial arrangement of the visual stream, as was the case with cinema, for instance.

Whereas reading and writing always provoke *mental images*—there are as many Madame Bovaries as readers of Flaubert's novel—the slide show of cinema already favours, in the

darkness of shared auditoriums, an *ideographic memorization*, followed by more or less pronounced phenomena of identification with the film's characters. But televised (and shortly digitalized) news broadcasts allow no form of *active* memorization, merely an emotional reaction whose *passive* violence is its sole criterion, channel surfers scarcely giving a thought to their ill-timed choices.

Besides, if development of virtual reality technologies goes hand in hand with development of interactivity, this is because the frame of the screen is incompatible with any real "man-machine dialogue", the individual's enslavement to their screen finally promoting only one-way communication.

But to conclude, let's go back to the very nature of the success of this first Latin-European "media coup d'etat".

Both *producer* and *product* of his multimedia at the same time, Prime Minister-entrepreneur Berlusconi is neither *Citizen Kane* nor the actor-president Ronald Reagan, for he is "transparent" or, rather, "trans-apparent", both in front of and behind the screen. Cold in the extreme, the suave president of the Italian Cabinet has no special charisma. "Telepresent" when he is absent, his physical presence during public debates is so weak (*debole*) that you can sense how unhappy he is to be there, *here and now*, while his habitual telegeny leads him to always be *here and elsewhere at the same time*: in the stadium in Milan, in studios or supermarkets, with his clients—in other words *nowhere*... "Media" populism now supplanting that properly-socalled "political" populism that has led Italy to the operation of cleaning up its corrupt politicians.

A psycho-political consumer product deriving from the prestige of "*weakmindedness*", Silvio Berlusconi is soon going to have to publically confront—though with the unsilent majority of Italian youth behind him—his double, judge Antonio Di Pietro, who himself also relies on the mass media, though in the name of the *strongmindedness* of justice.

With the "antihero" prime minister confronting the prime magistrate "hero", the duel risks being savage, threatening civil peace, since Italy's "republic of judges" will not this time call in for questioning the old corrupted political guard but, indirectly, the young "transpolitical" guard emerging from the elections—in other words, from the fight against corruption led by those same judges!

We can easily imagine the mileage that the federalists or nationalists would make out of a mishap that would see the fall of Silvio Berlusconi, after the example of Fernando Color ...

The splintering of the country into rival and antagonistic tendencies would then fairly faithfully reproduce the "war of secession" between Yankees and Confederates, with the Unionists attempting to oppose the Seperatists of the "Lombardy League" ...

Be that as it may, the arrival of neofascist ministers at the seat of a government within the extended European community means all the revisionisms and negationisms are going to be able to give free rein to their interpretation of History, and this, for the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of our continent!

One thing is for sure: we are dealing with a postpolitical avant-garde—only, it is *the avant-garde of forgetting*.

1 May 1994

Delirious New York

The attack on the *World Trade Center* is the first of the post-cold war. No matter who is responsible, it ushers in a new era of terrorism having nothing in common with the repeater explosions that regularly rock Ireland or England.

Indeed, the outstanding feature of the attack is that it was actually seriously intended to bring down the the World Trade Center building; in other words, to bring about the death of tens of thousands of innocent people. In the manner of a massive aerial bombardment, the single bomb, made of several hundred kilos of explosives, placed in the building's very foundations, could have caused the collapse of a tower four hundred meters high... So it is not a matter of a simple remake of the film, *Towering Inferno*, as the image-conscious media like to keep saying, but much more of a strategic event confirming for us all *the change of military regime of this fin de siècle*.

Rather as the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in their day, signalled a change of era for *war*, the explosive van of New York illustrates in its own way the mutation of *terrorism*.

Inaugurated by the collapse of the "Berlin Wall", and in particular by the Gulf War, the end of the age of nuclear deterrence is today confirmed by the civil war in ex-Yugoslavia, but also by this luckily abortive attempt to bring down the New York tower.

Driven to a frightening upping of the ante by the uncertainties of American foreign policy and especially by the question mark hanging over young President Clinton's capacity to implement it—will he turn out to be a Kennedy or a Carter?—the enemies of Western policies are putting the adversary to the test! Though it is too often forgotten, *military intervention* has not hung back waiting for the recent resolutions of the UN Security Council, with their "humanitarian" dimension, in order to happen. For donkeys' years, the "gunboat diplomacy" of bygone colonialism has been thoroughly revived by terrorist action, the offensive intervention of commandos more or less controlled by certain states, as well as the fledgling power of narco-capitalism.

With the New York bomb, we thus find ourselves faced with one last *extreme escalation* of the kind of military-political action that is based simultaneously on a limited number of actors and guaranteed media coverage. It has actually reached the point where soon, if we don't look out, a single man may well be able to bring about disasters that were once, not long ago, the province of a naval or air force squadron.

Indeed, for some little time, the miniaturisation of charges as well as chemical advances in the detonation of explosives have been promoting a previously unimaginable equation: ONE MAN = A TOTAL WAR.

At the very moment that the United Nations Organisation is hoping *to reopen the Nuremberg tribunal* to try the authors of war crimes, it is equally urgent to severely penalize terrorist practices no matter where they spring from; otherwise, we will look on powerless as this type of "economical" operation suddenly proliferates, capable as it is of generating an unbelievable amount of damage, not only for the innocent victims but also, and especially, for democracy.

After the age of the *balance of terror*, which lasted some forty years, the *age of imbalance* is now upon us.

The historic attack on the World Trade Centre marks its beginning. A veritable BIG BANG, this criminal act cannot continue to be masked by the concern to avoid causing panic for those living in the great metropolises. Indeed, there is no point waiting for the future "nuclear terrorism" to begin if the States responsible or those more or less controllable organizations are already daring to take action in this way: trying to bring down one of the tallest buildings in the world to get their differences or their political opposition across, regardless of whether they kill twenty people or thirty thousand in the process. It is urgent that we protect ourselves effectively at the very moment that the American media are set to launch *The Military Channel*, a new television channel that will broadcast documentaries and serials about war, weapons and explosives twenty-four hours a day!

After New York on February 2, it was Bombay on March 13, then Calcutta four days later where new charges were exploded, the idea being to destroy the Stock Exchange of the economic capital of India and three buildings in the commercial district of Bow Bazaar, not far from the center of the country's former colonial capital ...

If we add to this the IRA's recent attack on the City of London, we find ourselves faced with a grand-scale offensive from the proponents of terror. Even if there are clearly different causes and objectives involved, effecting regions without any apparent connection between them, no one can deny the catalogue of disasters that is today striking the world's great strategic centers.

In the United States, the World Trade Center is, as we know, one of the most important economic centers of telecommunications in the country; the same goes for the Bombay Stock Exchange or the City of London. The Bow Bazaar of Calcutta is equally a financial Mecca of business in India.

Three hundred dead in Bombay and close to a thousand seriously injured, fifty dead in Calcutta and close to a hundred injured ... Even though there were no more than five dead and ten seriously injured in New York, the terrorist dimension of these bomb attacks no longer has anything in common with the political "petty crime" of recent years. The perpetrators are determined not merely to "settle the argument with guns" now, but to actually try to devastate the major cities of the great world marketplace.

We now find ourselves faced with a model of "organized terrorism" and for the same reasons that one now speaks, in relation to public safety, of "organized crime", as opposed to classic petty crime, we must now get used to distinguishing between the "petty terrorism" of the age of nuclear deterrence and this terrorism that, with the end of the cold war, inaugurates the age of nuclear proliferation.

Yet we need to go back over the recent revolution in weapons systems to interpret a mutation that is not only quantitative but *qualitative* as well. From the beginning of the nineties and particularly with the war in the Persian Gulf, we have seen the strategic emergence of the "communications weapons" that have superseded the traditional supremacy of "weapons of destruction" and "weapons of obstruction"—in other words, the duel of arms and armour.

After the three fronts of the armies of land, sea and air, we are effectively seeing the gradual build up of a fourth front: that of the power of information.

Now, let's not forget that international terrorism is inseparable from this *media front* and that terrorist attacks only make sense and have any political value because of the televised publicity they invariably have at their disposal. With the "telegeny" of such atrocities constantly reinforcing their evocative power, certain countries, such as the Soviet Union and Italy, have even got to the point of placing a blanket ban on media coverage of the worst terrorist exactions—along with accidents ...

If the miniaturization of destructive power can now allow a single man or a small commando to inflict damage similar to that of a broad-based military operation, it goes without saying that the old mass war of the armies of yore risks shortly being wiped out, disappearing, as some *mass killer* comes to the fore, using the impact of the mass media to bring maximum pressure to bear on international public opinion.

What is remarkable here is that the sudden proliferation of the "molecular" terror of traditional explosives—in anticipation of the proliferation of "nuclear" terror—is accompanied by a growing pauperization of war. We are going back to the conflicts of the fifteenth century, to the *condottieri* and the great bands of brigands that once plundered the European countryside in the days of private wars... In the end, you don't need much money if you have heaps of charisma, religious or otherwise, to promptly buy a band of "para-military" assassins.

This is what we see happening today, as much in the Balkans as in Medellin or Burma, within the golden triangle of drugs; not to mention the various mafia in Russia and elsewhere.

Note by way of provisional conclusion that the attack on the World Trade Centre is testimony to the clever combination of a strong symbolic dimension and an urban demolition capability implicating only a small number of individuals who used a delivery van to deliver terror ... In the days of *cruise missiles* and the most sophisticated nuclear weapons carriers, you have to admit that that is a striking example of political economy!

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