

The Speed of Terror

Mr. Bush, Our War Comes First!

(*Jerusalem Post*, Autumn 2001)

"Whoever comes first has the law on his side." This ancient Roman law of priority, which created a lasting order, is creating chaos in the world at present. Terrorism, fundamentalism, mass Immigration, regional conflicts, national conflicts, economic crises, retro-Nazism, etc.—they all in one way or another claim adherence to the duplicity of this juridical argument, with its double thrust: *To come first* can mean to arrive first in a place as well as to be the oldest occupant of a territory.

In fact, what this law originally accomplishes is the legalization of a strategic rule that aims to make compatible *defense* (relative inertia) and *attack* (accelerated movement): rampart and road, stopping and racing, closed space and open space, interior and exterior, real and virtual.¹ So we will defend the limits of the city-state where we stand, and then the marches and frontiers of the nation-state that we inhabit. Legally, we will be able to run off and plant our flag in "unknown lands," provided we are the first to discover them.

The Orient, Timbuktu, the sources of the Nile, the summits of the world, the North Pole, the Moon ... everywhere you look, you will see the banners of the West raised and flying, showing the gains of this great Western competition to be "more pathetic than nothing at all" (Karl Kraus).

Not for centuries has the scientific, clear conscience of the West of "great discoveries" ceased obeying this strategic law of the city, this ingenious juridical stratagem that weds the concept of the *just war* not only to the law of the strongest, but to the law of the fastest.

An impartial observer of Hitler's *Totalmobilmachung* remarked in 1938: "However far our time has evolved in its taste for mobility, one cannot imagine movement without goal or direction as something self-sufficient."

This overlooks what Cervantes had pointed out: that to govern in space, it is not enough to be a simple *captain in the war of Time*; you still have to organize human Time in its totality. Thus the city-state will progressively move from the *local times* of astronomical observation to military calendars that depend on troop movements and choreography, while the unities of classical tragedy—action, time, and place—announce the establishment of *universal Time* on the stage of the world, the Time of a final realization of global conquest.² An American jurist of the last century remarked: "Americans are a people that love dramatic effects. We love whatever is spectacular. It's an intense need all over the nation. *We are synchronized to think fast*, and we want things to happen the way they do in theatre." He added: "There is no loyalty or constancy in the mind of the masses. But every public initiative has become the manifestation of this mass mind. So, in most cases, the public can retain an emotion for no more than a few minutes. *To have any effect on public opinion, the emotional chain must not be broken.*"

The time has come when all civil activity will succumb to the absolute distortion of violence, the chronic terror so feared by Clausewitz in his admirable analysis

of popular war, the time when the gigantic machines which armies have become will succumb to something fluid, something vaporous, *that nowhere condenses into a solid body*.

"You need heavy casualties to create a lasting impression on people," an American terrorist proclaimed. We have experienced this with the disappearance of the real battle field in Kosovo and, in parallel, the multiplex appearance of cathodic terrorism, which counts both on the real attack and, even more so, on its emotional virtualities. The present conflicts facing the international community are just so many arguments about the priority of indigenous peoples versus the acceleration of multimedia without territories or borders—they are also intractable wars, as the paradigm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows, where the undeclared state of war is confused, absolutely, with a declared civil war.

After the attacks on September 11th, does this headline from the *Jerusalem Post*, "Mr. Bush, Our War Comes First," not signify the absolute distortion, in time and space, of the ancient law of strategic priority? This has become the law of the present, the real-time transmission and reception of the event—a present isolated from its "here and now" in favor of a commutative elsewhere. It is no longer the present of our presence in the world, but the present of our tele-presence in an instantaneous trajectory.

The end of the 20th century has seen not only the close of the second millennium, but also the enclosure of Earth, the living planet.

Thus globalization is not so much the culmination of the acceleration of History as the closure of its virtual domain. From here on out, the globe is twice encircled by the ceaseless orbit of satellites, and we bump up against this invisible wall of habitable space just as we bump up against the envelope or the flesh of a habitable body. However, for us men and women, and we are only terrestrial, the world today is a dead-end and claustrophobia a terrifying threat.

A cosmic ghetto, the world and the city confused: this is the last act of a global tragedy in which interactive technologies promote, all at once, the cyberneticization of geophysical space and of its atmospheric volume—by pressing a button we turn against ourselves the very weapon of suicidal terrorism, the weapon of those who died on terror's cathodic field of honor.

After the equilibrium of the 20th century's nuclear terror, we are now witnessing the *disequilibrium of terror*, a new total war so inseparable from its cathodic framing, that it has triumphed in memory through commercial cassettes, placed side by side with war games and other video games in shopping malls.

This is something the American military machine has understood. And so, to inspire the young to join its ranks, the army of Earth created, in 2002, two video games that are supposed to introduce and endear them to those situations in which military personnel are likely to be involved.

Developed by a specialized company, *Soldiers* and *Operations* are available free of charge on the Internet and in the recruitment offices of the U.S. Army. To pre-

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empt those critics who might point to the violence of these games, the officer in charge of the project insists that these military productions are much less aggressive than the majority of "civilian" video games: "The use of force in these games is exactly like the use of force in our armed forces. There are *some* rules!"

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Translated from the French by Michael Taormina

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- 1 One of the most ancient gods of Roman mythology is Janus Bifrons, who is represented by two opposed faces, like a door—arrival and departure—or an interface.
 - 2 Cf. The tragedy of Antigone, who defends the "unwritten laws" of a religious time that does not pass away, whose beginning and end we do not know—against the haste of the *Raison d'Etat*.