

If you need convincing, all you have to do is look at the very latest stock exchange crashes, the successive burstings of the speculative bubbles of the single market in a financial system that is now interconnected or has gone on-line.

Faced with this state of affairs, very largely catastrophic for the very future of humanity, we have no choice but to take stock of the urgent need for making perceptible, if not visible, the speed with which accidents surge up, plunging history into mourning.

To do this, apart from searching in vain for some black box capable of revealing the parameters of the contemporary disaster, we have to try *as fast as possible* to define the flagrant nature of disasters peculiar to new technologies. And we have to do this using scientific expertise, of course, but also a philosophical and cultural approach that would wash its hands of the *promotional expressionism* of the promoters of materials, since, as Malraux said, 'culture is what made man something more than an accident in the Universe.'

3 The Accident Argument

Progress and disaster are two sides of the same coin.

Hannah Arendt

Lately, as though an accident was now an *option*, a privilege granted to chance to the detriment of error or the desire to do harm, the accident argument has become one of the mass media's pet themes, flagging, by this very fact, the confusion now creeping in between sabotage and breakdown, on the one hand, and between the suicide bombing mission and the industrial or other accident, on the other.

Actually, the unprecedented increase in the number of catastrophes since the start of the twentieth century and right up to the present day when, for the first time, 'artificial' accidents have outstripped 'natural' accidents, makes everyone aware that they have to choose, meaning opt, for one or the other version of whatever calamity might be under way. Whence the weirdly academic expression: the accident argument.

And so, since the end of the past century, disruption – fracture – has gradually become a matter of conjecture and no longer, exactly, an unexpected surprise, causing the very term 'accident' to shed its classical philosophical meaning, which it has enjoyed since Aristotle.

Suddenly, an accident is no longer unexpected, it turns into a rumour, a priori scandalous, in which the presupposition of a fault tends to outpace anything involuntary or, conversely,

the near certainty of the will to do harm is covered up in the overriding concern not to provoke panic.

We might note, here, the presumption of guilt immediately heaped on anyone refusing to buy the *official argument* for a fault or an accident and who favours instead a version completely at odds with the one touted by the powers that be.

In any case, as soon as the catastrophic event emerges in its 'terrorist' dimension, the term 'argument' is swiftly dropped for the (police) term invoking the lead or line of enquiry following a criminal act.

This semantic blurring illustrates pretty clearly the building confusion between the 'genuine' accident occurring unexpectedly to a substance and the indirect strategy of a malicious act completely typical but disdaining anything as obvious as openly declared hostility – something the rules of classic warfare still required not so long ago (*frighten, certainly, but avoid at all costs releasing a terror that is unspeakable and counterproductive for its anonymous authors*), in a society where the screen has become a substitute for the battlefield of the great wars of the past.

The general trend towards negation of any terrorist attack – a new type of negationism that is emerging – is part and parcel, now, of the importance of the *corporate image* of any country or nation open to the cross-border tourism industry that is constantly growing thanks to the low cost of transcontinental transport.

Whence the gravity of the New York attack, which calls into question not only the United States's status as a sanctuary, but also the boom in the major airlines and the liberalization of tourist flows, to say nothing of the catastrophic impact of the collapse of the Twin Towers on the comprehensive insurance market.¹

From now on, faced with the ubiquity of risk, often even of a major risk of disaster for humanity, the issue of *fear management* becomes crucial once more.

To paraphrase a like-minded writer, we might even assert today that: 'If knowledge can be shown as a sphere whose volume is endlessly expanding, *the area of contact with the unknown is growing out of all proportion*.'²

By replacing the geometric term *sphere* with the spatio-temporal term *dromosphere*, we can't help but come to the conclusion that, if the speed at which the unknown has been growing expands or intensifies fear, this alarm in the face of the final end of humanity of which the ecology movement represents an early warning sign, then that fear is set to increase even further in the twenty-first century, in anticipation of one last movement emerging, an *eschatology* movement, this time, that would be concerned with stockpiling the dividends of terror.

The abrupt undermining of the *substantial war* that derived from politics via hyperterrorism, this *accidental war* that no longer speaks its name, also undermines politics – and not only traditional party politics.

Whence the alternation not so much between the traditional left and right any more than between politics and the media, in other words, this information managing (generating) capability that is gearing up to invade the imaginary of populations held in thrall by a proliferation of screens that perfectly typifies the globalization of 'affects' – this sudden synchronization of collective emotions greatly favouring the *administration of fear*.

To administer fear in order to manage security and civil peace or, conversely, to administer fear to win a civil war – that is indeed the alternative that today characterizes the psychopolitics of nations.

As you can easily imagine, anxiety and doubt about the origin of an accident are part and parcel of this underhand administration of emotions; so much so that, in the near future, the Ministry of War could well be shunted aside for the 'Ministry of Fear' run by the movie industry and the mass

media as integral parts of the *audiovisual continuum* now replacing the public space of our daily lives.

This explains the strategic urgency of maintaining uncertainty about the origin of each and every 'accident' for as long as possible since the declared enemy and official hostilities between the old states and governments have been put paid to now by the *anonymous attack* and the sabotage of daily routine, in public transport or in business firms as at home.

By way of a convincing example of this transmutation in 'politics-as-spectacle', we might cite the Hollywood blockbuster of 2002, an adaptation of Tom Clancy's 1991 novel about terrorism, *The Sum of All Fears*, sponsored by the US Department of Defense with the direct involvement of the CIA and its veteran agent, Chase Brandon, who is not afraid to claim, for his personal use, a phrase from the Gospel of St John: 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32).³

In the winter of 2001, the US Defense Department announced the quiet, not to say furtive, creation of a new Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). Placed under the control of the Under-Secretary of Defense charged with politics, Douglas Feith, this information operation, a veritable 'Disinformation Department', was tasked with the diffusion of false information designed to influence 'the hearts and minds' of a terrorist enemy, itself just as diffuse ... a *strategy of deception* from which the media of countries allied to the United States would obviously not be exempt.

Very swiftly, though, as you might expect, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was to denounce a project designed to manipulate public opinion in enemy or allied states indiscriminately. At the end of February 2002, the OSI affair was officially canned.

Now there's a fine example for you of an information accident, in other words, of brainwashing designed to sow doubt about the truth of the facts, thereby creating anxiety over

diffuse threats whereby any disturbance in perception of events always reinforces the anguish of the masses.

Suicide bombing or accident? Information or disinformation? From now on, no one really knows.

In this example, which is just one among many, privileging the accident remains (as long as is necessary) the preferred option of the administration of this public fear that has nothing to do with the private fear of individuals, since the intended aim is above all *emotional* control to psychopolitical ends.

Confronted by this chain of media events, each one more catastrophic than the last (the anthrax virus, the threat of a radiological bomb, and so on), it is surely appropriate to ask ourselves about the dramatization that has been taking place since the beginning of the twenty-first century, in New York, Jerusalem and Toulouse as well as Karachi and elsewhere.

The first objective of this new dramatic art is: to never break the chain of emotion set in train by catastrophic scenes. Whence this crescendo close to the end of a media show kicked off by Greek tragedy at the same time as Athenian democracy. In fact, for the historian of Antiquity, as for the modern philosopher, the tragic chorus is the city itself, where the future is played out between the menace of a single person and the war of each against all; this stasis that democracy must protect itself from every bit as much as from the lone tyrant.

With the globalization of the real time of telecommunication, as the new century gets under way, the public stage of the theatre of our origins gives way (and how!) to the public screen, on which the 'people's acts' are played out, this liturgy where repeat catastrophes and cataclysms have the role of some *deus ex machina*, if not of the oracle announcing the horrors to come and denouncing, thereby, the abomination of the destiny of peoples.

With television, which allows hundreds of millions of people to see the same event at the same moment in time, we are

finally living through the same kind of dramatic performance as at the theatre in days not long gone. From that point on, as Arthur Miller explains, 'there is no difference between politics and show business anymore; it is the performance that persuades us that the candidate is sincere.'⁴

This has reached the stage where the people's elected representative is scarcely more than a living audimat measuring audience ratings! To maintain the illusion, to keep up the play being performed before your disbelieving eyes, at all costs, that is the objective – the tele-objective – of the contemporary mass media in the age of synchronization of opinions. Anything that destroys this collective 'harmony' must be mercilessly censured.

Since 11 September 2001, as we've all been able to observe, media coverage of acts of violence has everywhere expanded. From local delinquency to the global hyperviolence of terrorism, no one has managed to escape this escalating extremism for long. And the accumulation of felonies of a different nature has little by little given the impression that all forms of protection collapsed at the same time as the World Trade Center.⁵

And so this dramatic portrayal has created, in televiewers, a twin fear, a stereo-anxiety. Alarm over public insecurity has been topped up with fear of the images of 'audiovisual' insecurity, bringing about a sudden highlighting of domestic terror, designed to intensify collective anguish. 'We are living off the echo of things and, in this upside down world, it is the echo that gives rise to the cry,' Karl Kraus once observed.⁶

'This mute cry of the hordes of the absent, all present at the same moment in front of their screens contemplating disaster, stunned, is not without repercussions. The results of the French elections of 21 April 2002 prove the point abundantly, for 'it is not so much the event now as the anaesthesia that makes it possible and bearable that offers us explanations.'⁷

The sudden stereoscopic highlighting of the event, accident or attack, thus well and truly amounts to the birth of a

new type of tragedy, one not only audiovisual, but binocular and stereophonic, in which the perspective of the real time of synchronized emotions produces the submission of consciousness to this 'terrorism in evidence' – that we see with our own eyes – that further enhances the authority of the media.

ACCIDENT or ATTACK? From now on, uncertainty rules, the mask of the Medusa is forced on everyone thanks to Minerva's helmet or, rather, this visual headset that endlessly shows us the repetition (in a mirror) of a terror we are utterly fascinated by.

On 6 May 1937, as the afternoon drew to a close, the dirigible *Hindenburg* caught fire above Lakehurst not far from New York. It was the first great aeronautical catastrophe of the twentieth century and it counted thirty-four victims.

A young journalist commented on the event, live, on radio. His name was Orson Welles, almost the same name as that of the novelist who, some thirty years earlier, in 1908, described the bombing of New York by German dirigibles in his book, *The War in the Air*.⁸

Within thirty interminable seconds, the ocean liner of the air was blazing away like a torch in front of the news cameras and the thousands of onlookers waiting for the zep-pelin to land.

Accident or sabotage? Three commissions of inquiry tried to determine the causes of this spectacular tragedy, in those days of political woes. The final verdict very quickly favoured the accident argument, by the same token bringing about the final abandonment of passenger transportation by this type of air carrier.

There, too, without radiophony and the newsreel cinema of Fox-Moviexone, this major accident would not have had the mythical impact it has had – not being on anything like the scale, for instance, of the 1,500 victims of the *Titanic* twenty-five years earlier.

Similarly, this event, dire as it was for future relations between the United States and Nazi Germany, would not have found its place in history without the association of the genius of Orson Welles and that of Herbert George Wells – at the exact moment when, if not *The War of the Worlds*, also made into a movie by Orson Welles, the Second World War was about to break out and set the skies ablaze over Hiroshima and Nagasaki as its grande finale.

Now that they're ginning up not only to relaunch dirigible transportation, but to fly transatlantic planes that can seat 500 or even 1000, the question that must now be asked is where the qualitative (if not quantitative) progress lies in such loopy overkill.

Aviation accident or sabotage? The question must be asked, over and over again, unless we decide that, in the end, the fact of wanting to fly thousands of passengers at the same time in one and the same air carrier is already an accident or, more exactly, sabotage of prospective intelligence.

4 The Accident Museum

A society that unthinkingly privileges the present, real time, to the detriment of past and future, also privileges accidents. Since, at every moment, everything happens, most often unexpectedly, a civilization that implements immediacy, ubiquity and instantaneity, stages accidents and disasters.

Confirmation of this fact is provided for us, moreover, by the insurance companies, in particular by the Sigma study recently conducted on behalf of Swiss Re, the second biggest re-insurer in the world.

Recently made public, this study, which has listed, every year for the last twenty years, technical disasters (explosions, fires, acts of terrorism, and so on) and natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and so on), only takes into account the set of disasters exceeding 35 million US dollars in damage.

'For the first time,' the Swiss analysts note, 'since the 1990s, a period when the damage due to natural catastrophes was greater than technical damage, the trend is the reverse, with technical damage at 70 per cent.'

Proof, if proof were needed, that far from promoting quietude, our industrialized societies have, over the course of the twentieth century, intensified anxiety and increased major risks, and this is not to mention the recent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Whence the urgent necessity of reversing a trend that consists in exposing us to the most catastrophic accidents deriving from technoscientific genius, in order to kick-start the opposite approach which would consist