

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 gunning 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

in exposing the accident — exhibiting it — as the major enigma of modern progress.

Even though certain car manufacturers conduct more than 400 crash tests a year in a bid to improve the safety of their vehicles, the television networks never cease inflicting the road-death toll on us — to say nothing of the endless reruns of the tragedies that make current affairs so dismal. And so it is merely high time that ecological approaches to the various forms of pollution of the biosphere are finally supplemented by an eschatological approach to technical progress, to this finiteness without which dear old globalization itself risks becoming a life-size catastrophe.

A catastrophe at once natural and artificial, a general catastrophe, one no longer specific to this or that technology or to this or that part of the world, one that would far outpace the disasters currently covered by the insurance companies of which the long-term tragedy of Chernobyl remains the patent symbol.

In order to avoid shortly inhabiting the planetary dimensions of an integral accident, one capable of integrating a whole heap of incidents and disasters through chain reactions, we must start right now building, inhabiting and thinking through the laboratory of cataclysms, the museum of the accident of technical progress. This is the only way to avert the sudden springing up, in the near future, following the accident in substances — revealed by Aristotle — of the accident in all knowledge, a full-scale philosophical accident which genetic engineering, in the wake of atomic engineering, now portends.

Whether we like it or not, globalization is today the fatal trademark of finiteness. Paraphrasing Valéry, we could say with some confidence that, 'the time of the finite world is beginning.' It is urgent we grasp that knowledge marks the finiteness of man, exactly as ecology marks the finiteness of man's geophysical environment.

At the very moment that some people are calling, by open letter to the president of the Republic of France, for the creation of a 'museum of the twentieth century' in Paris,² it would seem appropriate to ask ourselves not only about the historical chain of events of that fateful century, but also about the fundamentally catastrophic nature of those events.

If 'time is the accident of accidents,'³ then the history museums already in fact anticipate the museum of this integral accident which the twentieth century paved the way for on the pretext of some or other scientific revolution or ideological liberation.

Every museology requiring a museography, the question of how to show the havoc wreaked by progress is left hanging but must be asked as a crucial aspect of the project.

Here, we have to say that, far from the history books and chronicles of the press, radio, followed by the cinema newsreels and especially television, foreshadowed the historic laboratory we are talking about.

Indeed, since cinema is time exposing itself as the sequences scroll past, with television, it is clearly the pace of its 'cross-border' ubiquity that shatters the history that is in the making before our very eyes.

And so, general history has been hit by a new type of accident, the accident in its perception as visibly present — a 'cinematic' and shortly 'digital' perception that changes its direction, its customary rhythm, the rhythm of the ephemerides or calendars — in other words the pace of the long time-span, promoting instead the ultra short time-span of this televisual instantaneity that is revolutionizing our vision of the world.

'With speed, man has invented new kinds of accidents. [...] The fate of the motorcar driver has become a matter of sheer luck,' Gaston Rageot wrote, in the 1930s.⁴

What can you say, today, of the major accident of audio-visual speed and so of the fate of the numberless hordes of

telev viewers? If not that thanks to it, history becomes 'accidental' through the abrupt telescoping of facts and the collision of events once successive that have become simultaneous, despite the distances and time lapses once necessary to their interpretation.

Just imagine, for instance, the probable damage done by the practice of live digital morphing to the authenticity of the testimony of history's actors.

'For a long while the movies took their cue from the other arts, now it is the visual arts that take their cue from the movies,' Dominique Pâmi recently lamented apropos the dominant influence of film on the conception of contemporary art.

But, in fact, history as a whole takes its cue from filmic acceleration, from this cinematic and televisual crush! This is behind the ravages in the circulation of images, the constant telescoping, the pile-up of dramatic scenes from daily life on the nightly news broadcast. If the print media have always been interested in trains that get derailed rather than those that arrive on time, with the audiovisual we are able to look on, flabbergasted, at the overexposure of accidents, catastrophes of all kinds, to say nothing of wars.

With the television image, we have looked on, live, since the end of last century, at endless overkill in the broadcasting of horror and, especially since the boom in live coverage, in the instantaneous broadcasting of cataclysms and terrorist outrages that have largely had the jump on disaster films.

Even more to the point, following the standardization of opinion that came in with the nineteenth century, we are now witnessing the sudden synchronization of emotions.

The ratings war of the television networks has turned the catastrophic accident into a scoop, not to say a fantastic spectacle sought after by all.

When Guy Debord spoke of the 'showbiz society', he forgot to mention that this adaptation of life to the screen is

based on sexuality and violence; a sexuality that the decade of the 1960s claimed to liberate, whereas the real agenda involved obliterating societal inhibitions one by one, considered as they were by the situationists as so many unacceptable constraints.

One of the organizers of the Avoriaz science fiction film festival puts it perfectly: 'Death has finally replaced sex and the serial killer, the Latin lover!'

'Museum of horrors' or 'tunnel of death' television has thus gradually been transformed into a sort of altar of human sacrifices; using and abusing the terrorist stage and repeat massacres, television now plays on repulsion more than on seduction. From the so-called live death of a little Colombian girl who sank into the mud twenty years ago, right up to the execution, in September 2000, of little Mohamed Al-Dura, hit by a bullet as he lay in his father's arms, any excuse will do for feeding the fear habit once it is created.

Conversely, as you will recall, the mass media of the old Soviet Union never gave out information about accidents or attacks. Except for natural disasters that were pretty hard to sweep under the carpet, the media outlets systematically censured any breach of norms so that only the horizon of a radiant future would filter through . . . This, right up to Chernobyl.

But, speaking of censorship, liberalism and totalitarianism each had their own peculiar method for smothering the truth of the facts. For liberalism, the process already involved overexposing the televiewer to incessant replays of calamities, while totalitarianism opted for underexposure and radical concealment of anything and everything out of the ordinary. Two separate panic movements, but producing an identical result: censorship by floodlighting, fatal bedazzlement for the democratic West; and censorship by banning every divergent representation, the 'might and fog' of deliberate blindness for the dogmatic East.

Just as there exists a Richter scale for telluric catastrophes, there also exists a sort of secret scale of media-relayed catastrophes whose most obvious effect is to inspire resentment against those running the show, on the one hand, and, on the other, an effect of exemplarity that ends, when it comes to terrorism, in reproduction of the disaster, thanks to its dramatic amplification. This has reached the point where it would now be appropriate to supplement the birth of tragedy once studied by Nietzsche with an analysis of this media tragedy where perfect synchronization of the collective emotion of viewers would play the same role as the Greek chorus of antiquity, not on the scale of the theatre of Epidaurus now, but on that life-size scale of whole continents.

This is obviously where the Accident Museum comes in. Actually the media scale of the catastrophes and cataclysms that cripple the world with grief is now so vast that it must necessarily make the magnitude of the field of perception the first phase of a new intelligence, not only that of the ecology of hazards due to pollution of the environment now, but also that of an ethology of threats in terms of brainwashing public opinion, of polluting public emotion.

This form of pollution always paves the way for intolerance swiftly followed by revenge, in other words for forms of barbarity and chaos that soon overrun human societies. This is amply demonstrated by the massacres and genocides of our day that blowback from the deadly propaganda of the 'media of hate'.

After all the waiting for the integral accident, we are now witnessing the forcible birth of a 'catastrophism' that has nothing in common (not by any means) with the pessimism of the 'millenarian' obscurantism of days gone by. But it does mean we need to be just as careful and use that Pascalian *esprit de finesse*, a sharp subtlety that the mass information outlets are so cruelly lacking in.

Indeed, since one catastrophe can hide another, if the major accident is indeed the consequence of the speed of

acceleration of phenomena engendered by progress, it is merely high time, now we've negotiated the turn of the twenty-first century, that we analyse wisely what crops up, what surges out of the blue before our very eyes, leading to the overwhelming necessity, now, for *exposing* the accident.

One last example to wrap up: fairly recently, astronomers have been cataloguing and monitoring asteroids and meteorites heading for Earth.

Baptized 'geo-cruisers', these earthbound fireballs some tens of metres in diameter obviously represent a threat of collision with our planet.

The last direct hit from such a rogue object occurred over Tunguska in Siberia in 1908 and its explosion at an altitude of 8,000 metres flattened an area of over 2,000 square kilometres of forest.

To try and avert recurrence of such a cosmic catastrophe, particularly in overpopulated areas, a working group was subsequently set up. Thanks to the support of the International Astronomical Union, this team was able to come up with a scale of NEO (Near-Earth Objects) hazards known as the Torino Scale, after the Italian town in which the protocol was adopted in 1999. Running from zero to ten, this scale of cataclysms takes account of the mass, speed and predicted path of the celestial body concerned.

Five zones have now been indexed by the scientists: a white zone where there is no chance (sic) of reaching Earth; a green zone where there is only a minuscule probability of contact; a yellow zone where there already exists a probability of impact; an orange zone where this probability is significant and, lastly, a red zone where catastrophe is inevitable.⁵

An illustration in no way alarmist of the cosmic activities which the surface of the night star bears the traces of, not to mention the Barringer Crater in Arizona over a kilometre in diameter which is very popular with American tourists, this

very first attempt to expose the accident to come demonstrates the urgent need of establishing, in the twenty-first century, along the lines of the famous 'cabinets de curiosités' of the Renaissance,⁶ a MUSEUM OF THE ACCIDENT OF THE FUTURE.

5 The Future of the Accident

The world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence.

Norbert Wiener

Nothing lost, nothing gained. If inventing the substance means indirectly inventing the accident, the more powerful and high-performance the invention, the more dramatic the accident.

And so the awful day comes when Progress in knowledge becomes unbearable, not only due to the various forms of pollution it creates, but due to its feats, the very power of its negativity.

This was confirmed for us throughout the twentieth century, with the race for nuclear and thermonuclear weapons that are ultimately unusable and of great concern to the protagonists of deterrence, *all-out* deterrence.

The very power of atomic weaponry in fact also flags the ultimate limitation of a power that suddenly morphs into powerlessness. In this instance, the accident is the panicking uselessness of this type of weaponry.

Rather than actually fighting, military commanders then engage in the imaginary of a 'wargame' that doesn't add up, where virtuality is merely the mark of the political inconsequence of nations, since the consequences no longer really matter. For they are at once too enormous to be seriously taken in and too appalling to be viably put to the test . . .