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Television and Terror

Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse

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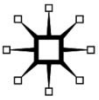

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For Marie Gillespie

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Prologue: The (Terrorised) State We're in

'Post 9/11'. This has become the principal marker of terror and insecurity today. It remains to be seen whether the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 have permanently disrupted the notions and structures of security the West had settled upon after the Cold War or whether they contribute to a continuity, one link in a chain of terror events enabled and executed through 'our' media. What is beyond doubt, however, is that television has been unable to prevent itself elevating and supporting a mantra. *Nothing can be the same, the world has changed*. Post 9/11, we become aware of the compression and entanglement of environmental, economic, and ontological insecurities. Out of a single discursive order are generated a thousand pinpricks of insecurity.

Central to this, terror and terrorism have acquired an extensity and mobility that is accelerated primarily by mass media, which become the terrorists' weapon of choice. Terror is the dynamic that courses readily through those intensive modes of representation that underlie what we understand as 'news'. It is on and through television that terror infuses and catalyses speculative discourses alongside, or at the expense of, proportionate, substantiated, and contextualised reporting. The medium pulls events increasingly into an anticipated, often-dreaded future as it dwells on the catastrophes and near-calamities of the past. And the 'enemy', constructed by and through this discursive crisis of our times, is all that is and which becomes 'post 9/11'.

And yet, television, as it delivers daily the spectre of endless terror and violence from places far and near, also rescues us from the brink of chaos. The unimaginable is rendered familiar and terror is harnessed in the frames, rituals, and routines of the major medium of our age. And it is this entanglement of television and terror that is pivotal in both the spinning and containing of the discourses of insecurity that appear already to mark the mediatised experience of the twenty-first century.