

Watching 9/11: In the Time of the Event

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Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present – Albert Camus



‘Young people on the Brooklyn waterfront on Sept. 11’ –Thomas Hoepker/Magnum,

I. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the advent of the new millennium was anticipated as a potentially world-shaking occurrence. It seemed to be a genuine possibility that midnight on December 31, 1999 would see the unleashing of a cataclysm of digitised malfunction – the so-called “millennium bug” or “Y2K”. As it happened, the only exceptional feature of the change from December 31st 1999 to January 1st 2000 was in the heightened character of the accompanying celebrations. In fact, the event that really seemed to mark the new century occurred over a year and a half later – on September 11, 2001.¹

It is probably no exaggeration to say that “9-11” has now become the iconic event of our age, with the iconic form of that event being the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. It is surely this event, above all others, that stands as the decisive watershed marking off the twentieth century from the twenty-first. Indeed, since the fall of the Towers in 2001, we seem to have been catapulted into a time of what may well appear unprecedented uncertainty not seen since the two world wars. The war on terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the appearance of militant Islam in a new and seemingly globalised form (as well as the rise of other forms of violent extremism), new forms of social breakdown of which the London riots of July 2011 are but one example, heightened concerns over global warming (marked by its own key events – the Kyoto Protocol, the failed Copenhagen Agreement), and most recently, in an intriguing case of event turned acronym, the “GFC”, and the ongoing crises that have followed from it, are all part of the post-9-11 world. If we were shaken by 9-11, then it seems that the tremors have not yet died down, while new instabilities seem constantly to appear. It is a state of “shakiness” that seems reflected in the physical world no less than the socio-political: volcanic eruptions now seem to be a regular cause of interruption to world air travel, while earthquakes and tsunamis appear as a focus of attention more than ever before. Surely this is an era in which our “being shaken” has become the normal state of things, in which we live in an ongoing state of crisis, and of uncertainty.

Yet all too often the sense in which we are indeed “shaken” by the uncertainty of our era is only inasmuch as we are led to search for new ways to respond and try to make ourselves secure once more. As our age appears more uncertain, so it is also an age characterised by the increasing erection of systems, structures and processes that will enable uncertainty to be managed, measured, and manipulated. The world of globalised uncertainty is also the world of globalised connection, surveillance, coercion, and control. There is thus a strange discontinuity that now exists between the widespread view of our world as a place of constant change, crisis, and challenge on the one hand – and in many quarters, an increasing pessimism and despair at what the future may hold – and on the other, the continued growth of a corporatized and consumerist world order, itself closely intermeshed with governmental structures, that is incapable of questioning itself or of recognising its own limits and contradictions, and that acknowledges nothing that cannot be incorporated into its world-encompassing frame. In this respect, the uncertainty of globalised modernity has not prompted any genuine turn back to reflect on the character of that world or on our own mode of being within it. For the most part, in fact, quite the opposite is true. The present age is one in which we are ever more in thrall to the structures and processes in which our lives have become enmeshed and on which they are ever more dependent.

“9/11” thus stands as a marker of the present age understood both as an age of the sudden and catastrophic disruption of the familiar and the known – as the time, one might say, of “being shaken”, *the time of the event* – and as an age in which the familiar and the known remain continuous and apparently undisturbed in the face even of the disruptive and the catastrophic. This strange juxtaposition is vividly, if controversially, presented in Thomas Hoepker’s photograph, taken on the morning of September 11, 2001 (and reprinted above), of a group of New Yorkers apparently relaxing on the Brooklyn riverfront as the smoke from the destruction of the Twin Towers plumes threateningly in the background.² Whatever the factual circumstances concerning the scene recorded here, it provides a graphic depiction of the way in which the “eventful” character of the contemporary world, and the crisis and uncertainty that belongs with it, seems nevertheless to have been incorporated into the ongoing background of contemporary life. In Hoepker’s photograph, the event appears as both threatening and yet also distanced, as disruptive and yet also removed. The incongruity that is evident here does not belong merely to this event, to 9/11, alone, but to the contemporary phenomenon of “the event” as such, and so also, perhaps, to the language and vocabulary of the event that has become so ubiquitous a part of contemporary theory.³

II. Thomas Hoepker’s 9/11 photograph was first published in 2006, when it was also the focus of a column in the *New York Times*.⁴ Two of the individuals pictured took issue with the image – far from being relaxed and unconcerned, they said, all of them were deeply distressed by what was unfolding behind them⁵ – Hoepker’s image simply gave a false impression of what actually occurred. Similarly one might say that any claim to the effect that we were not shaken by 9/11 must fail to attend to the reality of the personal reactions to that event – such a claim must surely, like Hoepker’s photograph, constitute a misrepresentation of the real story.

There can be no doubt that, at the level of personal experience, 9/11, and events like it, appear to have had an enormous and continuing impact. Much of the writing and reporting related to the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in September 2011 has thus focused, not so much on the political aspects of the event, but rather on the event *as witnessed* – and not only by those immediately present in New York on that September day, but also by those of us who watched it remotely around the world. Indeed, in response to the stock question: “do you remember where you were when 9/11 happened?”, most of us will answer “in front of the television”. The personal experience of the event, even for those who were not directly involved, is what remains in many people’s minds: the thought that this could not possibly be happening; the uncanny sense of watching destruction and horror on such a scale in the midst of otherwise ordinary surroundings; the witnessing of things (the “jumpers”) so shocking as to be almost unthinkable. This personal level of experience is often so strongly felt as to seem almost incapable of articulation or of any adequate comprehension.

The personal impact that many events have on us – the desire to make such events intelligible, to render them meaningful, to assuage our own distress at what we have witnessed – is itself a part of what makes an event like 9/11 loom so large. It is not surprising that we should look to identify such events as indeed “world-shaking” given the way we are ourselves shaken by them. Yet even here, even in the

personal impact of the event (at least, so long as the impact does not touch one in a direct way through personal harm or harm to those around one), one can discern a tendency towards a certain distancing of that event, a relegation of what has occurred to another part of our lives and memories – even though we may be personally shaken, the impact of the event is not such that we cannot move on in much the same way as before.

Thus, in relation to Thomas Hoepker's photograph, Frank Rich writes that: "Traumatic as the attack on America was, 9/11 would recede quickly for many. This is a country that likes to move on, and fast. The young people in Mr. Hoepker's photo aren't necessarily callous. They're just American. In the five years since the attacks, the ability of Americans to dust themselves off and keep going explains both what's gone right and what's gone wrong on our path to the divided and dispirited state the nation finds itself in today."⁶ Rich's comments obviously connect with a larger set of issues concerning American identity and self-conception – and this is so irrespective of the reality that lies behind Hoepker's image. Moreover, they also raise more general questions concerning the way in which "the event", whether 9/11 or any other, appears in terms even of our personal engagement with it. Indeed, the distancing of the event that is at issue here seems itself to be connected with the pre-eminence of the event in contemporary experience, and especially with the electronic mediation and multiplication of that experience.

The focus on the event is itself reinforced by our constant connection to news, information and entertainment services (available, through contemporary phone and video technology, almost every minute of the day) which not only ensure that we are always "in touch" with what is going on, and which deliver even more eventful content through the special effects "reality" of movies and games (and all as part of the same technological package). In this way "the event" is rendered almost generic through constant reiteration across different media and genres, while even the news report comes to appear as if it were part of a movie (as 9/11 appeared to so many who watched it unfold on their televisions), and the movie as if it were real.⁷ In this way, the event is not only reiterated, multiplied, genericized, but it is also reduced to its personal impact above all else – to its capacity for "affect". So although every event may indeed shake us at one level (and, given contemporary entertainment technology, even at the level of physical presence), at another level, and short of direct harm, no event seems to have the power genuinely to shake us in a way that would alter our habitual and preferred ways of thinking and behaving.

Of course, one might say that it is characteristic of human life that, even in the face of catastrophe, life goes on – we find ways to reform our lives, to continue, even to forget. But there is more than just this at issue here. Even at the personal level, what remains salient about 9/11, about the contemporary focus on the event, is not the fact of human resilience, but rather the heightened significance that is given to the event at the same time as it seems to be rendered almost inconsequential in its actual effect. If ours is the time of the event, the event that is at issue here appears almost as simulacrum, an epiphenomenon, a representation – its reality seemingly effaced by the very significance that is given to it. Moreover, this effacement occurs through the very technology that also brings the event to prominence. Even Hoepker's photograph stands within the frame of this technology – the complaint of those pictured that the image misrepresents the scene connects

directly with the way in which the representation of the event always stands, whether for good or ill, at a certain remove from that event. The event is duplicated in that representation, and in the space opened up by that duplication, there is the possibility of discontinuity and contradiction, as well as of revelation.

The personal impact of 9/11 is undeniable, and yet even this personal impact often seems to remain purely at the level of “affect”. So although Hoepker’s image can be seen to present a misleading impression of what is occurring on that Brooklyn riverfront, it would nevertheless also be a mistake to judge the image purely on that basis. In an important sense, Hoepker’s photograph is not about the individuals that are pictured. Rather it can be understood as a vivid depiction of the sense of incongruity and discontinuity that seems to attach to 9/11 and to many similar events – an incongruity and discontinuity that belongs to the event as such.

The incongruity that is expressed in Hoepker’s image applies both to the event as given at the level of personal experience and to the event as it appears within a larger worldly frame. Indeed, one of the reasons why Hoepker’s photograph seems so relevant ten years after it was taken is due to a significant shift in the way the event now appears. For all that 9/11 continues to be referred to as the event that “changed the world”, there also seems to be an emerging reassessment of the wider significance of what happened in New York on that September day. Francis Fukuyama argues that when we ask ourselves, with ten years hindsight, whether the world really did change on September 11, 2001, the answer is “not much”.⁸ Fukuyama’s claim is that not only was the threat represented by 9/11 much less than it might have appeared, but that, since 2001, “the most important world-historical story”, has not been anything associated with 9/11, but rather the rise of China. 9/11 was certainly the catalyst for US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, but even there it operated on the basis of a set of already existing tensions and preconditions, and, according to Fukuyama, was an over-reaction to what is an essentially marginal phenomenon. Although 9/11 may have heightened and hastened certain developments, it did not substantially change the overall direction of world events. If 9/11 shook the world, then the shaking was relatively limited.

Fukuyama seems largely correct in his assessment of the “world-historical” significance of 9/11, and it is certainly true that, in general, 9/11 has been accorded a significance that does not match the reality of its effects. Yet taken on its own, such an assessment might suggest that it is simply the focus on 9/11 as such – on that particular event rather than any other – that is misplaced. The real point at issue here, however, does not concern the relative weighting of events, just as the significance of Hoepker’s image is not to be found in whether it accurately depicts what was going on between the individuals pictured when the photograph was taken. What is in question is not the focus on this or that event, but the very focus on the event as such. For all that the event is taken to be that which “shakes” us, to be that which brings to the fore the crisis and uncertainty of our time, what the experience of the event – including 9/11 – actually seems to show is the extent to which we remain relatively “unshaken”, the extent to which even the event is constantly appropriated into (as it also emerges out of) the ongoing formation and projection of the contemporary order. What is at issue here is thus the very idea of the “singularity” of the event as such. Moreover this applies whether the singularity at issue is understood in terms of our own response to the event, and its capacity

radically to unsettle and destabilise our own modes of thinking and acting, or in terms of the causal significance of the event in the larger structure of world-historical process, and its salient and epochal character within that structure.⁹

The latter point is a significant one. There is clearly a distinction to be made between the causal significance of an event (which may surely vary from one event to another) and the causal significance that may be attached to it (and which may then determine the nature of the response to that event). Much of my argument here might be thought to relate to only the latter and not the former – and that any other impression is a result of a failure to make this distinction clear. What is at issue, it may seem, is thus a certain “fetishization” of events that fails to attend to their actual and varying (and often indeterminate) causal significance, but the argument against such fetishization should not be seen as touching anything related to what might be thought of as the underlying “ontology” of the historical, and the role of the event in that ontology. Certainly, the argument I advance here does focus on what might be thought of as something like an “ideology” of the event – a focus on the singular significance of the event – that is belied by the event and by the reality of our own responses to it. However, inasmuch as the focus on the event is not a focus merely on the event “as idea”, but on the event as “world-historical” phenomenon, so what is at issue is the singularity of the event as “ideological” and “historical”. The ideology of the event brings with it, no matter what may be claimed otherwise, a certain ontology of the historical, and it is this that is at stake no less than any “fetishization” alone.

III. Any event, including such an apparently world-shaking event as 9/11, no matter the global significance that may be attached to it, is itself always subject to the effects of other globally mediated events and processes. It is thus that an event such as 9/11 can both appear as both world-changing, and so as possessed of a heightened significance, and yet also as itself the product of a larger pre-existing structure, and as constrained and limited by it. Any and every event stands in such a relation, for every event is embedded in a larger structure of cause and effect. Yet the event as it appears in the contemporary world, the event of which 9/11 may appear exemplary, also appears in such a way that its global entanglement is itself given in the very formation and presentation of the event as such – and so the event is strikingly illuminated as both disruptive *and* as continuous. It is the spectacle of the event – a spectacle with which our contemporary world seems fascinated – that leads to the disruptive character of the event being brought to the fore, and thus the event feeds into a conception of the world as driven forward by the event – by a constant and recurrent “shaking”, by the epochal and the exceptional, by a historical movement that is always geared towards futurity and transcendence of the past.

The conjunction of disruption and continuity, even if the latter often appears suppressed or in a somewhat different form, is indeed central to the thought and the experience of the event as it belongs to the contemporary world. It is also central to the character of the event as essentially “global” – the thinking and experience of the event is thus itself tied to the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation. The event is already construed, then, as occurring within a global context; while the phenomenon of globalization itself is taken to have an event character. Our world is presented as a globalized and globalizing world – one given over to the constant

process, the constantly unfolding event, that is globalization. Indeed, the character of the event as itself enmeshed within a larger network, by which it affects and is affected, already draws it into the thinking of the global. Moreover, globalization is not to be understood here merely as some objective historical process that may occur independently of any form of self-conception or self-representation. Globalization is itself intimately bound up with the self-understanding of the contemporary world and the manner in which it forms and shapes itself through representation. Globalisation is thus no mere process, but a *representational* process, at the same time that it is also an economic, a political, a cultural process. Consequently, even though the phenomenon of global connection and integration is not without historical precedent, what distinguishes contemporary globalization from anything that occurred previously is precisely the manner in which the contemporary world identifies itself *as globalized*. Moreover, the globalised world is also the world *of event*, and the language of the event is the language of contemporary globalization.

No mere “local” occurrence, but appearing on television screens around the world as it happened, 9/11 was an event that belonged completely to this globalized world – appearing as the nexus for a set of vectors and flows that extended well beyond the city in which iconic form of that event occurred. Moreover, the fact that in its iconic form 9/11 was focussed on Manhattan island in New York (could it possibly have been focussed anywhere else?) only serves to underline the global character of the event. There is perhaps no other city that is as potent a symbol of the contemporary world in its dynamic and globally connected character than New York – no other city that is so completely taken up, not only in this one event, but in the very character of the event as such. As globalisation encompasses both the disruptive and the continuous, then so it can also be seen to encompass the disjunction between the sense of crisis or uncertainty and the desire for control that itself appears as a central feature of the contemporary world. It is thus that globalisation can be appropriated by proponents of both “reactionary” and “progressive” politics – apparently serving regimes of control as well as regimes of freedom.

Here the idea and experience of the event is itself tied to the idea of a globalised world articulated through notions of connection, flow, trajectory and process that disregard national and other boundaries – a world that can itself be understood as a continually unfolding “event” in which everything is drawn into connection with everything else, and from which nothing can stand apart. Such a world is inevitably characterised by a constant distance – everything is removed from everything else since everything is taken up into the same structure of connectedness in which the connection takes primacy over what is connected. Here is the real essence of the focus on the event: the event is that which presents itself, no matter the continuity on which it nevertheless also depends, as a recurrent rupture in which we are moved always towards what is to come, always towards what is new, always in the direction of what is elsewhere.

Connection thus takes the form of a constant *removal*. Such removal can itself be understood as a form of “transcendence” – a notion that often seems to appear in theoretical discourses that give primacy to the event – that can take the form of a return to what appears, and to the uncertainty and indeterminacy of that

appearance (thus making evident the strangeness of what appears and the limits of its intelligibility), but more often draws us away from that appearance, away from the concreteness of what appears, toward an often abstract and indefinite “beyond”.¹⁰ Here the association of the event with a language of excess – appropriate to the character of the event as itself excessive, exceptional, ruptural – reinforces the tendency for the focus on the event to move in the direction of this latter form of transcendence, a transcendence that is essentially a refusal of limitation, and that is itself closely bound up with the same refusal of limitation and the denial of boundedness that is so central to the phenomenon of globalization.

The character of the event, and especially the character of transcendence or “removal” noted above, marks the character of contemporary life in general. Our world is a world given over to the event, and to the world as event. When played out in the anonymous structure of contemporary organisations – whether in the form of the corporate business or the governmental bureaucracy – we become immediately subject to the same structure of “displaced connection” (evident in the ideas both of “removal” and of “transcendence”) that is so central to the structure of the event. The idea of “continuous improvement”, which has now become so embedded an element in contemporary organisations that the phrase itself has almost disappeared, provides a perfect instance of exactly the sort of empty futurity that drives the never-ending “event” of organisational change, of constant audit and accountability. Moreover, it is a structure no less salient in our personal lives in which the driving force is not managerial or bureaucratic, but consumerist, and in which social participation is increasingly inseparable from technological engagement.¹¹ Here we are constantly appropriated into the ongoing event of online availability and connection, of chat, tweet and blog, of expanding .

The “displaced connection” that appears here might itself be taken to be part of what Hoepker’s 9/11 photograph points towards. Hoepker provides an image in which the event, 9/11, is present, and yet also distanced from us just as it appears to be distanced from those who are pictured. The distancing that occurs, which is indeed tied to a distancing that takes place through the very abolition of distance that globalization supposedly also brings, arises in Hoepker’s photograph through a certain spatialization that belongs to the photographic image. Everything is given in a single “time”, flattened out, presented as juxtaposed within one spatial frame. The event does not necessarily spatialize in the same way (globalization itself collapses *both* space *and* time into a single quantifiable dimensionality), but it does position us in such a way that where we are is always determined by somewhere else – in the case of the event, the present and the past, are always given over to the future, but a future that, in the context of globalization, is nothing other than the constantly expanding connectivity of a globalized system. Moreover, the future understood in this way is always “another country”, as it were, and so always open to the extremes of idealization and rhetoric, as well as to simple indifference.

While the event may appear precisely as that which disrupts our systems of management and control, its real effect is to give rise to further efforts to make those systems more secure, more encompassing, more complex – and also, in a certain sense, ever more vulnerable.¹² In this respect, one of the peculiarities of globalization, understood once again as a mode of self-understanding as well as a mode of world-formation, is that globalization is indeed seen as enabling greater

control through an expansion of the compass for action – and so globalization is promoted by governments and corporations alike – and yet at the very same time globalization also appears as precisely that which brings greater unpredictability, catastrophe, and breakdown. Nowhere is the capacity for breakdown in such a globalized world better exemplified than in the GFC – the Global Financial Crisis – and yet here too is exemplified the same recalcitrance of the world to change in the face of that event. Thus for all the talk of a new global economic order, elements of the old system soon reasserted themselves – it was not a matter of changing the world in the face of the lessons learnt, but of finding ways to enable existing interests to be protected once more. While the repercussions of the GFC continue in the current global debt crisis, there is still little evidence of any genuine willingness to rethink the underlying premises of the world economy. For all the focus on the event, and on the globalized system in which it is embedded, it seems incapable of shaking us in any way that would lead us fundamentally to rethink ourselves or our situation.

IV. It might be thought that in a world given over to the event – in a world constantly “shaken” – there would be a corresponding refusal to take things for granted, and an insistence on the need for questioning and critical reflection. Yet just as 9/11, or, indeed, the GFC, appear as “world-shaking” events, and yet the certainty of the world not be shaken by those events, so the eventful character of the modern and the contemporary seems to be accompanied, in those parts of the world that are most modern and most contemporary, by a withdrawal of questioning and a loss of critical engagement – even, one might say, by forms of apathy and insularity. The rise of political conservatism that is so widespread, especially in America, Europe, and Australasia (as well as its continuing presence in Asia and elsewhere), may be taken as one manifestation of this phenomenon, but it is also seen in the increasing desire on the part of governments and organisations to manipulate and manage communities and populations, to control information and debate, and to prevent any disruption to existing economic and political structures.

The exception of course, is when existing structures are themselves seen as threats to the stability of global modernity itself, and it is this that may, albeit briefly, have seemed a possibility instantiated in 9/11. The support for the movements that make up the so-called “Arab spring” – support given in spite of the fact that those movements represent a revolt against forms of rule previously supported by “the West” – also sees those movements as potentially modernising in character in much the same way that the collapse of Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, was seen twenty or more years ago. Significantly, democratic and populist movements in South America are typically seen rather differently, and are often viewed as lacking the same “modernising” potential, in part because they operate against existing globally dominant economic and political structures.

Contemporary theory tends to present the event as part of a “progressive” discourse that would challenge existing structures, that underpins a more ethical mode of engagement in the world, and that might even give rise to a different form of politics. Yet not only is the focus on the event itself bound up with exactly the structures that might otherwise seem in need of challenge, but that focus can itself

operate to lead us away from genuine engagement, either into the empty desert of a idealised rhetoric, into a disengaged apathy, or back into exactly the exploitative forms of social, political and economic organisation that seem to dominate so much of the contemporary world. The thinking of the event is indeed too much determined by the very structures and processes that it attempts to critique – its prevalence is just one more manifestation of the pervasiveness of contemporary globalized modes of formation and representation. What could one expect, in the time of the event, but that its thinking would also be determined by that same event?

Thomas Hoepker's image of 9/11, taken in its general rather than its personal significance, shows us the possibility of the event as both world-shaking, and so as demanding of our attention, and yet also as that which barely even touches us, on which, perhaps, we may choose to turn our backs. The language of the event does not help us in the attempt to engage with the demands of our contemporary world, and one reason it does not do so is that the language of event – the language of the exceptional, the disruptive, the epochal, the language, perhaps, of "being shaken" – can all too readily lead us away from our already present engagement in the world as it is before us. It can readily lead us away from that present situatedness – a situatedness in the everyday and the ordinary – that calls upon us to act, to aid, to respond, to think, to question. Moreover, it may even do this in spite of our efforts to use the very language of the event to turn us back to that situated engagement.

Perhaps this ought to bring us back to the real "situatedness" of the individuals in Hoepker's photograph. The individuals who responded to the image when it was published protested that they were indeed distressed, "shaken", by what was occurring across the river. On that morning their response was to stop, to meet, to talk. What else could be done in that situation on that day? There is, of course, a much larger question about what occurred in the days, months, years after 9/11, and at that point we move beyond the actions or responses of individuals, and onto the larger question of the responsibility of a community, of a government, of a nation, of the wider world, but the question of the individual response remains, and for many of us that question must be the most pressing. It is, moreover, a question that has to remain *as a question* – not as something to which one can give any univocal answer. Indeed, to suppose that there is an answer here would be to suppose that there is some clear action that could be taken, some new event that could be realised, that, unlike what has gone before, would indeed "shake" things. To think thus would be to remain within the thinking of the event that is so problematic.

V. There is an incongruity that belongs to the event, not to one event alone, not even to the event of 9/11, but to the event as it has come to prominence in contemporary culture, discourse, and theory. The marker of the uncertain and catastrophic, the event is nevertheless also the marker of resistance to uncertainty and change, even of its refusal, and of the constancy of the movement towards reintegration back into the normality of what is familiar, manageable and controlled. The incongruity of the event derives from the larger framework of contemporary globalized modernity to which it belongs, and that is itself marked by the conjunction of disruption and continuity. Within this structure, the event appears as that which

removes and displaces, but always back into a larger system of constantly reformed connection.

If ours is the time of the event, then the event is surely that which constitutes the basic “ontology” of our time – that which constitutes its determining principle. What this means, however, is not that ours is a time that can be characterized in terms of some philosophical predilection for event over thing, process over stasis, time over space.¹³ The event is the determining principle of our time inasmuch as our time is marked by the emphasis on the singular and epochal, the uncertain and the catastrophic – on “being shaken” – even as we also attempt to insulate ourselves more and more against such uncertainty and crisis. The transcendence of the event is, all too often, a transcendence that removes us from the questionability of the present, that displaces us from the uncertainty of our own situatedness, and that removes us from any genuine sense of responsibility or responsiveness.

The claim that the ontology of our time is given in the form of the event may be thought to ignore the character of the event as itself standing against any form of ontology – as perhaps a form of anti-ontology – and even as ignoring the way in which our time may itself be seen as antagonistic to the ontological, as refusing any principle that might determine or underlie (in a world of constant flow, connectivity, and movement, there can be no stability of the sort that ontology surely presupposes). Yet such a reading serves only to reinscribe back into the character of the event the very figure of the discontinuous and disruptive that the event itself belies, while at the same time assenting to that by which contemporary globalized modernity represents and replicates itself – the contemporary “ontology of the event” is thus an ontology that is itself complicit with the character of our time as characterised by a disruption that itself turns back towards continuity; an urgency that looks constantly to the re-inscription and re-formation of the existing order.

The incongruity that is at the heart of the contemporary focus on the event can be seen as an incongruity at the heart of the contemporary formation of the world. It is also an incongruity evident in an exemplary way in the phenomenon that is 9/11. In that event, and in the mode of world-formation that it exemplifies, we see the sudden interruption of the ordinary and the apparently secure, an interruption that is projected as indeed “world-shaking” in character, and yet that also serves effectively to remove us from our concrete engagement with the world and its demands – to remove us from any genuine sense of urgency, of uncertainty, or of questionability.

¹ This essay was completed in the weeks leading up to the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in September 2011. The remembrance of the event frequently made reference to the event’s “world-changing” character – this was the event that “changed all of our lives”.

² Reproduced in David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11*, 2nd edn. (New York: Picador, 2011).

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- ³ I have in mind particularly the thinking that emanates from the work of Deleuze, but also a number of other thinkers from Baudrillard to Badiou and even Levinas. One might include Heidegger in this group, although I would argue that the “event” that appears his thinking is a more complex concept – the *Ereignis*, as I have argued elsewhere, is to be understood less in the manner of the event of contemporary theory, and more in terms that are directly connected to the notion of place (see my *Heidegger’s Topology*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006). The pre-eminence of the event in contemporary theory may be connected, in some instances, to the “process” thinking of such as Bergson and Whitehead. In contrast, however, I would argue that the contemporary thinking of the event is most definitely not connected, in any significant way, with the event ontology of Donald Davidson. Davidson’s preference for an ontology of events over an ontology of objects is concerned to address a very different set of issues from anything to be found in Deleuze, Baudrillard, Badiou, Whitehead, Bergson, or almost any of the other thinkers one might mention here.
- ⁴ See Frank Rich, “Whatever Happened to the America of 9/12?”, *New York Times*, September 10, 2006, sec.4, p.12. An online discussion ensued in the online journal *Slate*, led by a piece in which David Plotz took issue with Rich’s commentary on the image (<http://www.slate.com/id/2149508/>), and to which Hoepker also contributed (<http://www.slate.com/id/2149675/> – all sites accessed September 5, 2011). The photograph also gave rise to a number of online discussions elsewhere. See also the discussion of the photograph in Jonathan Jones, “The meaning of 9/11’s most controversial photo”, *The Guardian*, September 2, 2011.
- ⁵ The two who responded were Walter Sipser and Chris Schiavo - see <http://www.slate.com/id/2149578/>.
- ⁶ Rich, “Whatever Happened to the America of 9/12?”, *New York Times*.
- ⁷ Its excesses notwithstanding, there is thus a genuine point to Baudrillard’s analysis of the contemporary world as given over to *simulation* (see Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994). However, Baudrillard also remains firmly within the thinking of the event that is so characteristic of contemporary theory – see especially his comment that 9/11 was “the ultimate event, the mother of all events, the pure event – uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place” (in “L’esprit du terrorisme” published in *Le Monde*, November 2, 2001, and reprinted in *Harper’s Magazine*, 304, no.1821 (2002): 13-18).
- ⁸ See Fukuyama, “The legacy of that terrible time will be less significant than we feared”, *The Observer*, September 11, 2001, p.32.
- ⁹ It might be thought that there is a separation between the causal significance of an event (which may surely vary from one event to another) and the causal significance that may be attached to it (and which may then determine the nature of the response to that event). It might be thought that much of my argument here actually concerns the causal significance we attach to events in general – that I am concerned with a certain “fetishization” of events that fails to attend to their actual and varying (and often indeterminate) causal significance. Certainly, the argument I advance here does focus on what might be thought of as an

something like an “ideology” of the event – a focus on the singular significance of the event – that is belied by the event and by the reality of our own responses to it. However, inasmuch as the focus on the event is not a focus merely on the event “as idea”, but on the event as “world-historical” phenomenon, so what is at issue is the singularity of the event as “ideological” and “historical”.

- ¹⁰ The event carries both these forms of transcendence within it, and often the focus on the event aims to draw more on the first sense of transcendence than the second. The tension that exists here is the same tension evident in the character of the event as explored elsewhere in this discussion. Although that tension moves in different directions, it is more often the second of these two senses of transcendence that takes primacy – often in spite of an express focus on the first.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of some of the issues at stake here see Malpas, “The Place of Mobility: Individualization, Relationality, and Contemporary Technology”, in Rowan Wilken and Gerard Goggin (eds), *Mobile Technology and Place* (London: Routledge, in press, 2012).
- ¹² The greater and more encompassing the attempt to exert control, the greater and more encompassing is the inevitable breakdown in control. See Malpas and Wickham, “Governance and the World: from Joe DiMaggio to Michel Foucault” *The UTS Review*, 3 (1997), pp.91-108.
- ¹³ In respect of the latter, although the focus on the event is often seen as involving a certain “temporalism” that can be discerned in the focus on the event, that focus nevertheless also belongs within a larger framework that, as I remarked above, actually collapses time and space rendering both in terms of a structure of infinite connection and calculation.