

Fear (The Spectrum Said)

Brian Massumi

That momentary paralysis of the spirit, of the tongue and limbs, that profound agitation descending to the core of one's being, that dispossession of self we call *intimidation*. . . . It is a *nascent social state* that occurs whenever we pass from one society to another. —Gabriel Tarde

The future will be better tomorrow. —attributed to George W. Bush

In March 2002, with much pomp, the Bush administration's new Department of Homeland Security introduced its color-coded terror alert system: green, "low"; blue, "guarded"; yellow, "elevated"; orange, "high"; red, "severe." The nation has danced ever since between yellow and orange. Life has restlessly settled, to all appearances permanently, on the redward end of the spectrum, the blue-greens of tranquility a thing of the past. "Safe" doesn't even merit a hue. Safe, it would seem, has fallen off the spectrum of perception. Insecurity, the spectrum says, is the new normal.¹

The alert system was introduced to calibrate the public's anxiety. In the aftermath of 9/11, the public's fearfulness had tended to swing out of control in response to dramatic, but maddeningly vague, government warnings of an impending follow-up attack. The alert system was designed to modulate that fear. It could raise it a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response. Timing was everything. Less fear itself than fear fatigue became an issue of public concern. Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government.

The self-defensive reflex-response to perceptual cues that the system was designed to train into the population wirelessly jacked central government functioning directly into each individual's nervous system. The whole population became a networked jumpiness, a distributed neuronal network registering en masse quantum shifts in the nation's global state of discomfiture in rhythm with leaps between color levels. Across the geographical and social differentials dividing them, the population fell into affective attunement. That the shifts registered en masse did not necessarily mean that people began to act similarly, as in social imitation of each other, or of a model proposed for each and all. "Imitation renders form; attunement renders feeling."² Jacked into the same modulation of feeling, bodies reacted in unison without necessarily acting alike. Their responses could, and did, take many forms. What they shared was the central nervousness. How it translated somatically varied body by body.

There was simply nothing to identify with or imitate. The alerts presented no form, ideological or ideational and, remaining vague as to the source, nature, and location of the threat, bore precious little content. They were signals without signification. All they distinctly offered was an "activation contour": a variation in intensity of feeling over time.³ They addressed not subjects' cognition, but rather bodies' irritability. Perceptual cues were being used to activate direct bodily responsiveness rather than reproduce a form or transmit definite content.

Each body's reaction would be determined largely by its already-acquired patterns of response. The color alerts addressed bodies at the level of their dispositions toward action. The system was not in any direct way a subjective positioning device. It was a body-aimed dispositional trigger mechanism.

Bodies would be triggered into actions over the exact nature of which the governmental emission of the perceptual cue had little direct control. Individuals would inevitably express their attunement to the affective modulation in their own unique ways. It was in a second moment, through the diversity of the resultant actions thus triggered, that each would position him- or herself subjectively in relation to others. Any moment of reflection that might come would come after, in discussion or retrospective review. The system addressed the population immediately, at a presubjective level: at the level of bodily predisposition or tendency—action in its nascent state. A color shift would trip each body's tendencies into an unfolding through which its predispositions would regain determinate form in particular actions attuned to a changed situation. Each body's individuality performed itself, reflexively (that is to say, nonreflectively) in an immediate nervous response. The mode under which the system operated was cued directness of self-expression, in bodily action. It was less a communication than an assisted germination of potentials for action whose outcome could not be accurately determined in advance—but whose variable determination could be determined to occur, on hue.

The system was designed to make visible the government's much advertised commitment to fighting the "war" on terrorism it had so dramatically declared in the days following 9/11. The collapse of the World Trade Center towers had glued the populace to the TV screen with an intensity not seen since the assassination of President Kennedy in the medium's early days, and in its recent history comparable only to the Gulf War show. In a time of crisis, television was once again providing a perceptual focal point for the spontaneous mass coordination of affect, in a convincing rebuttal of the widespread wisdom that as a medium it was falling into obsolescence as a consequence of the Internet's meteoric rise in the late 1990s. Any ground television may have lost to the Web as an information source and as the pivot point for family entertainment was recouped in its resurgent role as the privileged channel for collective affect modulation, in real time, at socially critical turning points. Television had become the *event* medium. The terror alert system sought to piggyback on television as social event-medium, capturing the spontaneity with which it regained that role. To capture spontaneity is to convert it into something it is not: a habitual function. The alert system

was part of the habituation of the viewing population to affect modulation as a governmental-media function.

This taming of television's affective role accomplished a number of further conversions. For one, it yoked governmentality to television in a way that gave the exercise of power a properly perceptual mode of operation. Government gained signal access to the nervous systems and somatic expressions of the populace in a way that allowed it to bypass the discursive mediations on which it traditionally depended and to regularly produce effects with a directness never before seen. Without proof, without persuasion, at the limit even without argument, government image production could trigger (re)action. But what public government function gained in immediacy of effect it lost in uniformity of result. If skillfully played, the system could reliably determine people to action, but the nature of the trigger, or inducer, as an activation contour lacking definite content or imitable form meant that it could not accurately determine *what* actions would be signaled forth. In a sense, this was an admission of political reality: the social environment within which government now operated was of such complexity that it made a mirage of any idea that there could be a one-to-one correlation between official speech or image production and the form and content of response. The social and cultural diversity of the population, and the disengagement from government on the part of many of its segments, would ensure that any initiative relying on a linear cause-effect relationship between, on the one hand, proof, persuasion, and argument and, on the other, the form of a resultant action—if in fact there was to be any—was bound to fail, or to succeed only in isolated cases. The contradiction-friendly pluralism of American politicians' public address is evidence that this has long been recognized in practice (the fact, for example, that a George W. Bush will address car workers in his down-home, Texas-transplant drawl as a man of the people looking out for the struggling families of Middle America, then tell a fund-raising dinner that his "base" is the "haves and have-mores"⁴). Addressing bodies from the dispositional angle of their affectivity, instead of addressing subjects from the positional angle of their ideations, shunts government function away from the mediations of adherence or belief and toward direct *activation*. What else is a state of alert? Orienting for the indeterminacy of pure activation assumes that the nature of the actual responses

elicited will be finally determined by off-screen co-factors that are beyond politicians' ken, and not for lack of effort but because they are highly contingent and therefore highly changeable. The establishment of the alert system as a linchpin in the government's antiterror campaign is an implicit recognition that the production of political effects, if they are to be direct and widespread, must unfold in a manner that is nonlinear and co-causal; that is to say, complex. The perceptual mode of power set in place by the yoking of governmentality to television in this affective way couples governmental functioning with the contingency native to complex systems, where input does not necessarily equal output, because all manner of detourings, dampenings, amplifications, or interference patterns may occur in the playing out of the signal. With affect, perceptually addressed, chance becomes politically operational. A political uncertainty principle is *pragmatically* established. It practically acknowledges that the systemic environment within which power mechanisms function is metastable, meaning provisionally stable but excitable, in a state of balance but ready to jog.⁵

The necessity for a pragmatics of uncertainty to which the color system alerts us is related to a change in the nature of the object of power. The formlessness and contentlessness of its exercise in no way means that power no longer has an object. It means that the object of power is correspondingly formless and contentless: post 9/11, governmentality has molded itself to *threat*. A threat is unknowable. If it were known in its specifics, it wouldn't be a threat. It would be a situation—as when they say on television police shows, “we have a situation”—and a situation can be handled. A threat is only a threat if it retains an indeterminacy. If it has a form, it is not a substantial form, but a time form: a futurity. The threat as such is nothing *yet*—just a looming. It is a form of futurity yet has the capacity to fill the present without presenting itself. Its future looming casts a present shadow, and that shadow is *fear*. Threat is the future cause of a change in the present. A future cause is not actually a cause; it is a virtual cause, or quasicause. Threat is a futurity with a virtual power to affect the present quasicausally. When a governmental mechanism makes threat its business, it is taking this virtuality as its object and adopting quasicausality as its mode of operation. That quasicausal operation goes by the name of security. It expresses itself in signs of alert.

Since its object is virtual, the only actual leverage the security operation can have is on threat's back-cast presence, its pre-effect of fear. Threat, understood as a quasicause, would qualify philosophically as a species of final cause. One of the reasons that its causality is quasi is that there is a paradoxical reciprocity between it and its effect. There is a kind of simultaneity between the quasicause and its effect, even though they belong to different times. Threat is the cause of fear in the sense that it triggers and conditions fear's occurrence, but without the fear it effects, the threat would have no handle on actual existence, remaining purely virtual. The causality is bidirectional, operating immediately on both poles, in a kind of time-slip through which a futurity is made directly present in an effective expression that brings it into the present without it ceasing to be a futurity. Although they are in different tenses, present and future, and in different ontological modes, actual and virtual, fear and threat are of a piece: they are indissociable dimensions of the same event. The event, in its holding both tenses together in its own immediacy, is *transtemporal*. Since its transtemporality holds a passage between the virtual and the actual, it is a *process*—a real transformation that is effected in an interval smaller than the smallest perceivable, in an instantaneous looping between presence and futurity. Since it is in that smaller-than-smallest of intervals, it is perhaps best characterized as *infra-temporal* rather than transtemporal.

As William James famously argued, fear strikes the body and compels it to action before it registers consciously. When it registers, it is as a realization growing from the bodily action already under way: we don't run because we feel afraid, we feel afraid because we run.⁶ He means "consciously afraid." We have already begun to experience fear nonconsciously, wrapped in action, before it unfurls from it and is felt as itself, in its distinction from the action with which it arose. *Activation* is a better word than action, because fear can be, and often is, paralyzing. When it is, in the place of action there is agitation, a poising for action, the taut incipency of action that may fail to take definitive form. Where a specific action does unfold, its onset still will have been in an indistinction with affect, in that vague feeling-acting-coming-on, in a durationless moment of suspense in the time slip of threat. It will have been a shock to the system, whose immediacy disconnects the body from the ongoing flow of its activities while already poising it for a restart.

Fear at this level of pure activation in the time slip of threat is the *intensity* of the experience and not yet a content of it. Threat strikes the nervous system with a directness forbidding any separation between the responsiveness of the body and its environment. The nervous system is wired directly to the onset of the danger. *The reality of the situation is that activation.* If an action triggers, the activation follows, prolonging the situation along a line of flight. The fear follows down the line, gathering into itself the momentum of the run, using that accumulation to fuel each successive footfall, moving the activation through a series of steps. The fear snowballs, as the reaction runs its course. The fear is a dynamic ingathering of action assuring the continuity of its serial unfolding and moving the reality of the situation, which is its activation, down the line of fright.⁷ *The experience is in the fear,* in its ingathering of action, rather than the fear being the content of an experience. At the starting line, the affect of fear and the action of the body are in a state of indistinction. As the action unfolds, they begin to diverge. The action is linear, step-by-step, and dissipative, it exhausts itself. It runs its course along the line of flight. The affective intensity, on the other hand, is cumulative. It snowballs as the action unfolds, and when the running stops, it keeps on rolling. Its rolling on after the running unwraps it from the action. It comes out into itself. It is only now, past action's stop-point, that it registers as a *feeling* of fear as distinct from its acting out. What registers distinctly with that feeling is the reality of the situation—which was and remains fundamentally affective in nature. The reality of the situation is its affective *quality*—its being an unfolding of fear, as opposed to anger, boredom, or love.

To say that at this level the experience is in the fear, rather than the fear being the content of an experience, is to say that its momentum-gathering, action-driving, reality-registering operation is *not phenomenal*. It is the in-which of experience; in other words, experience's *immanence*. But on the stop-beat, the experience comes out, into itself, registering its quality. Its unfolding then continues, along other lines. For it is only with the luxury of the pause that the body can begin to distinguish the details of the situation, previously lost to shock. It can look around, seeking to identify clearly the cause of the alarm, and take in the surroundings in case further action is necessary. It begins to *perceive*—to divide the situation into component parts, each with a location relative to the others and each with a recognizable constancy of form.

Objects in spatial configuration begin to appear, distinguishing themselves from the fear in which they were enveloped. This enables *reflection*. What just happened is placed under retrospective review and mapped as an objective environment. The location of the threat is sought by following the line of flight in reverse. The cause of the fright is scanned for among the objects in the environment. Directions of further flight or objects that can serve for self-defense are inventoried. These perceptions and reflections are gathered up in *recollection*, where their intensity will ultimately fade. It is at this point, in this second ingathering toward lowered intensity, in the stop-beat of action, that the fear, and its situation, and the reality of that situation, become a content of experience.

The unfolding reality of *that fearful feeling* has become the *feeling of that fear* enfolded in perception.⁸ The perception has been wrapped in reflection, and the reflection, in turn, has been taken up in memory. In recollection, the affective unfolding has folded back in, at a different level, in a different mode, after passing a threshold marked by the exhaustion of the action with which the feeling grew. The threshold is a conversion point, on a number of counts. It is where the nonphenomenal in-which of experience turns phenomenal, passing into the content of experience, its immanence translated into an interiority. At the stop-beat, the affective quality of the event comes out in its purity from action, but as it does, it becomes quantifiable. It had been, in its indistinction with action, the totality of the situation. The situation has now branched, the affect separating from the exhausted action by virtue of its continuing. The situation further divides into a *collection* of perceived objects, then again into reflections distinct from the perception, and *recollections* of some or all of those components. The fear that came out in its affective purity at the stop-beat is retrospectively but one of a number of ingredients of the experience. It is a countable component of an experience. That experience, which began as the dynamic unity of feeling in action, is now a collection of particular elements. The whole has become divisible, and what the experience was globally now counts in it as one of its parts. As a content of experience, this fear becomes comparable to other fear incidents in other recollected situations. It can now be counted as a greater or lesser fright. Where once it was intensity, it now has magnitude. It still qualifies the situation, but its quality is now quantifiable, in two ways: it counts as a one

among a number, and it can be assigned a relative magnitude. In intensity, it could only be *lived through* the body. As bodily lived it was unrefusable, a direct and immediate activation. It was *compelling*, and its compelling was one with the propelling of an action. Now it has taken its place as one content of the experience among others. It can be approached inactively as from the outside. It can be set alongside the other components and compared to them. As a quality, it still retains a certain ungraspability. Thus the objects to whose perception it led, whose appearance, as it happened, was a differentiation of the fear, now seem more solid and dependable than it. Retrospectively, they take on a larger share of the recognized reality of the event. The emotion is sidelined as the event's merely subjective content. Yet another branching has occurred, between the subjective and the objective. This bifurcation structures recollection.

If the event is recounted, the narrative will place the objective unfolding of the occurrence on a parallel track with its subjective registering, as if this duality were operative from the onset of the event, rather than an artifact of its self-differentiating unfolding. The personal history of the narrating body will have to negotiate this duality, presenting a public face allied with the content, defined as objective, in contradistinction to the subjective content, defined as private. The private content may not be recounted, or may be edited for reasons of tact or to avoid embarrassment. The emotional content may then waver and even start to break away from its anchoring to the objective narrative. The two-track narrative of the event may lose its parallelism. Unanchored, the vivacity of the emotional content diminishes, to the point where the emotion can be second-guessed: "I wasn't really scared—just startled." The emotion pales, as if it could be separated even as it happened from the immediacy of bodily response, and as if the subject of the experience could choose to have it or to pass it up. To treat the emotion as separable in this way from the activation-event from which it affectively sprang is to place it on the level of representation. It is to treat it, fundamentally and from the start, as a subjective content: basically, an idea. Reduced to the mere idea of itself, it becomes reasonable to suppose that a private subject, in representing it to itself, could hold it and the aleatory outside of its arising as well as the body in live-wire connection with that outside, at a rational, manageable distance. It makes it seem comfortably controllable.

A startle without a scare, however, is like a grin without a cat. The separation between direct activation and controlled ideation, or affect in its bodily dimension and emotion as rationalizable subjective content, is a reflective wonderland that does not work this side of the mirror. James is quick to make the discomfiting point. "Where an ideal emotion seems to precede [or occur independently of] the bodily symptoms, it is often nothing but a representation of the symptoms themselves. One who has already fainted at the sight of blood may witness the preparations for a surgical operation with uncontrollable heart sinking and anxiety. He anticipates certain feelings, and the anticipation precipitates their arrival."⁹ What he calls a representation here is clearly a *re*-presentation: the heart-sinking *is* the anticipation of the emotion, in the same way that he argues that in a case like running in fear, "our feeling of bodily changes as they occur *is* the emotion" in its initial phase of emergence.¹⁰ Anticipation is similarly a triggering of changes in the body. That affective reactivation of the body then develops unrefusably into a reemergence of the fear. What we sloppily think of as the idea of an emotion, or the emotion as an idea, is in fact the anticipatory repetition of an affective event, precipitated by the encounter between the body's irritability and a sign. In the surgical example, the blood functions as a sign of fear. Like a red alert, it directly activates the body. But the context obviates the need to run. You are in a condition to react to the blood precisely because you're not the one under anesthesia on the operating table. This is also a reason why actually running away would be somewhat off the point. The particular nature of the context inhibits the acting out of the movement. The activation of the body, however, was *already* that movement in incipient form. The failure of the movement actually to express itself does not prevent the development of the emotion proper, which should rightly phase in, on pause, after the action's actualization. Here, the body gives pause in advance, due to contextual constraints. In this context, the emergence of the emotion *pre-empts* action. Actual action has been short-circuited. It is *in*-acted: it remains enveloped in its own activated potential. The development of the emotion is now bound entirely to potential action. It can regenerate itself without the detour through actual movement: it can be *enacted* through in-action.

Part of the affective training that the Bush color alert system assures is the engraining in the bodies of the populace of anticipatory affective response to

signs of fear even in contexts where one is clearly in no present danger. This significantly extends the purview of threat. An alert about a suspected bombing plan against San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge (one of the early alert episodes) can have direct repercussions in Atlanta. As a plus, the enactment of the affective event in inaction has obvious political control benefits.

The purview of threat is extended in another way as well. When an emotion becomes enactable in anticipation of itself, independent of action, it becomes *its own threat*. It becomes its own virtual cause. "I am told of a case of morbid terror, of which the subject confessed that what possessed her seemed, more than anything, to be *the fear of fear itself*."¹¹ When fear becomes the quasicause of itself, it can bypass even more readily any limitation to contexts where a fearful action is actually called on and, in so doing, bypass more regularly the necessity to cycle through an unfolding of phases. The phases telescope into each other, in a short circuit of the affective process. The affective event rolls ever more tightly around the time slip of threat, as fear becomes its own pre-effect. "We see plainly how the emotion both begins and ends with what we call its effects."¹² Fear, the emotion, has revirtualized. Its emergence as an end effect has threateningly looped back to the beginning as its cause. This marks another turning point. Now, fear can potentially self-cause even in the absence of an external sign to trigger it. This makes it all the more uncontrollable, so much so that it "possesses" the subject. It wraps its time-slip so compellingly around experience that it becomes experience's affective surround. Without ceasing to be an emotion, it has become the affective surround of existence, its in-which. Self-caused and all-around: at once the ground and background of the experience it now tends to take over. Call an emotion that has revirtualized in this way, to become self-caused ground and enveloping background of overtaken existence, an *affective tone* or *mood* (as equally distinct from action, vitality affect, pure affect, and emotion proper).

Fear's intoning revirtualization does not mean that it will never again feature narratively as a contained emotion. Efforts to contain it will in fact have to be doubled in order to mitigate the subject's possession by it. But it is a vicious circle. The more successful the efforts, the more the subject's existence is wed to the process. Having fear as a subjective content against the background of fear revirtual becomes *a way of life*. However many times fear

is contained, it will always also exceed the containment because its capacity to self-regenerate will continue to loom and that looming will define the surrounding mood. Any particular fear clearly featured as an emotional life content will stand out against that comparatively vague or generic affective background from which it emerged. It will be clearly redundant: wherever it actually occurs as emotion, it will already have been as affective tone. Everywhere, fear double-features: as vaguely and clearly featured; as generic and particular; as ground of existence for itself as a way of life. Fear, in its quasicausal relation to itself, has become redundantly self-sufficient—an autonomous force of existence. It has become *ontogenetic*.¹³

This autonomization of fear is a next natural step from its preemption of action in the sign-response short circuit. Its development is conditioned by the independence that preemption enables from actual contexts of fear. When fear itself is frightening, its capacity to self-cause means that it can even trigger in the absence of any of its external signs. Politically, fear's autonomization risks undoing the control gained in that phase: fear can now *run away with itself*. It has the capacity to be self-propelling. This ups the ante of unpredictability. Where fear unleashed can lead is any alert emitter's guess. While the signs of danger may no longer be necessary for the triggering of the affective event of fear, their repetition and multiplication seeds the conditions for their own overcoming. They prepare the (back)ground.

It is only superficially that self-propelling fear can forego sign action. According to Peirce, "every thought beyond immediate perception *is* a sign."¹⁴ When fear is of fear itself, the retriggering of its affective process hinges on a thought-sign. This triggering still entails bodily activation. "There is some reason to think that, corresponding to every feeling within us, some motion takes place in our bodies. This property of the thought-sign, since it has *no rational dependence upon the meaning of the sign*, may be compared to what I have called the *material quality* of the sign; but it differs from the latter inasmuch as *it is not essentially necessary that it should be felt* in order that there should be any thought-sign."¹⁵

Consider that the only way to regain control over one's possession by fear once it has become self-propelling is to not feel it. "Put a stopper on the gush," as James indelicately puts it. In a word, suppress it. We are all taught how as children. "When we teach our children to repress their

emotions, it is not that they may *feel* more.”¹⁶ The emotion doesn’t build up volcanically because fear as self-propellingly in need of being controlled is not a sulphurous content but a revirtual cause. It has no substance to build up (only efficacy to intensify). So it is not that they may feel more, “quite the reverse. It is that they may *think* more” (ibid.). To suppress emotion is to produce more thought-signs, in an even tighter short-circuit. Now it is not only actual action but the feeling itself that is bypassed. The bodily activation continues necessarily to occur. But there is no “more” of it to build up either. It is not quantitative. By Peirce’s reckoning, it is a material *quality* of the body (a mode of its irritability). It may pass *unfelt*. The thought-sign is now intensively coupled with an incalculably qualitative unfeeling on which it has “no rational dependence.” Fear is coming to revolve more and more tightly around the logical vanishing point of an unexperience where matter and quality are one. This vanishing point lies at the very limit of the phenomenal. Fear’s passage to this limit carries its virtualization close to as far as it can go. Fear’s quasicausality can cycle in the shortest possible circuit, with the fewest actual requisites or intervening phases, between the qualitative-material unconscious and the thought-sign. This intensifies its efficacy, reinforcing the autonomy of its ontogenetic powers.

What Peirce means when he says that there is no rational dependence on the meaning of the sign is that “there is nothing in the content of the thought which explains why it should arise only on occasion of . . . determining thoughts.”¹⁷ In other words, there is no need for the thought-sign of fear to have any rational connection to contexts in which thoughts logically relating to it might occur. “If there is such a relation of reason, if the thought is essentially limited in its application to these objects [objects with which it is logically connected by context], then the thought comprehends a thought other than itself.” Without a relation of reason determining it, the thought may still occur, but when it does, it comprehends only itself. Fear has *self-abstracted*. It has become exclusively self-comprehending. It has become the autonomous thought of itself. It can now boldly go wherever thought can reach. And thought can reach wherever *attention* goes. Unfelt bodily motion (what Peirce calls “sensation”) and attention are, he says, “the sole constituents” of thought. “Attention is the power by which thought at one time is connected with and made to relate to thought at another time . . . it is the

pure demonstrative application of a thought-sign.” In the case of a thought determined by and comprehending only itself, the thought to which attention demonstratively links it at one time as to another is—itself. In thought, fear becomes intensively self-relating, independent to the extreme of actual context, or even other thoughts. It demonstratively signs itself.

This implies that *techniques of attention* applied against the background of the affective tone of fear revirtual may purely and demonstratively regenerate thought-signs of it, along with the unfeeling of its corresponding bodily activation. Fear has attained a summit of virtualization, almost fully autonomized (contingent only on the vagaries of attention) and abstracted from its actions, contexts, external signs, logical content or meaning, and, last but not least, its own feeling.

We have now entered the wonderland world where the startle can come without the scare: body activation without the feeling James insists that it *is*. We have passed to the other side of the affective mirror where fear “reflects” only its own Cheshire-cat-like occurrence, at the phenomenal vanishing point, where it is without.

Fear can now operate as the nonphenomenal background of existence, or outside in-which of experience, in its role as the affective tone or generic context for a way of life. It can also still be contained, featuring as a particular life’s phenomenal content. In addition, it can function purely self-demonstratively, as a self-sufficient thought process unencumbered by the bodily activation still necessarily accompanying it. Which of these modes, or which combination of them, will be in operation at any given point will depend on the regime of external signs in play, the nature of the contexts through which they multiply, the acquired skills of suppression impressed on the bodies populating those contexts, and the techniques of attention in operation (for example, as associated with the media, in particular as they disseminate themselves more widely and finely through the social field, assisted by miniaturization and digitization).

In this journey through fear, we have cycled, more than once, from virtual cause to virtual cause, the degree of virtuality increasing at each loop. In a first loop, we saw a self-differentiating unfolding into a variety of modes: from activation to feeling-in-action, from feeling-in-action to pure expression of affect, from pure expression of affect to branchings into perception,

reflection, and recollection, then on to affective containment. The process then continued, looping back into itself, through and in excess of its own containment. It attached itself to signs, then to thought-signs. At each cycle, its quasicausal powers expanded. Its modes of expansion emerged sequentially, as phases of a continuing process. But beyond the threshold of affective suspense in the first loop, the emergence of the modes was additive. The branching was onto levels of operation that were in cooperation, potentially working with or in some cases on each other. Although the phases emerge sequentially, they operate conjointly to form a complex, multilayered formation. The overall process is at once additive and distributive.

If the different phasings unfolded from the initial activation, their full variety must have already been in it, in their incipency—in *potential*. The intensity of that activation was the immanence of their potential. Rather than layered in a structure, they were immediately, virtually, co-occurring. In the feeling-in-action of the first run, they were all coursing together, in a state of actual indistinction from each other. They were actively fused, in dynamic superposition. This means that in any reactivation of the event by a virtual cause, the variety of modes become re-fused. They roll back into one another in shared potential. They *dephase* or dedifferentiate, then phase back out or re-unfold.¹⁸ Another occasion of experience self-differentiates into an unfolding variety. Experience regenerates itself. The strike of another actual threat will initiate a reemergence. But, given fear's emergent self-reflective capacity to be its own beginning and end, or to be the threat of itself, so, too, may any sign of the threat's potential effect (as in the sight of blood). A thought-sign may also initiate a recurrence, even if it is not logically the thought-sign of a threat or a fear (given the thought-sign's independence from its rational determinants). Once fear has become the ground of existence, every change can regenerate its experience under one or a combination of its species. Every shift in attention against the background mood of fear may carry the ontogenetic charge of an alert triggering a regeneration of experience and its variation (what Benjamin termed "shock").

George Bush's color alert system is designed to exploit and foster the varieties of fear while expanding on their ontogenetic powers. It assumes the full spectrum of fear, up to and including its becoming-autonomous as a regenerative ground of existence, in action and in-action, in feeling and without

it with thought. This refocusing of government sign-action on complex affective modulation is a tactic of incalculable power. It allies the politics of communication with powers capable of “possessing” the individual at the level at which its experience reemerges (*dispossessing* it of its own genesis). In other words, affective modulation operates co-optimally at what Gilbert Simondon calls the “pre-individual” level. By *pre-individual* he does not mean “within the individual” but rather “at the limit between the subject and the world, at the limit between the individual and collective.”¹⁹ That limit is the body activatable—the bodily irritability that is the generic “material quality” of human life.

For “action and emotion to be in resonance with each other” in the affectively self-regenerating ways just described “there must be a superior individual that encompasses them: this individuation is that *of the collective*.”²⁰ When an individual life overflows its containment in private narrative and representation—as each life tends affectively to do—the living runs straight to the limit of the collective. There it irritably rejoins the potential from which it arose, toward a next iteration of its many-phased ontogenesis. “The subject can coincide with itself only in the individuation of the collective.” This is because that limit is where the phases fold into each other toward a next deployment. It is there, in that immanence, that a life coincides with its affective potential. For better or for worse.

The alert system is a tool for modulating collective individuation. Through the mass media, it addresses itself to the population from the angle of its potential to reindividuate differentially. The system recenters government sign action on Gabriel Tarde’s nascent social state of intimidation in order to induce its collective individuation to pass from one form of society to another. All for the better, Bush says. The future, he promises, will be better tomorrow. America will be a stronger and safer place.

But tomorrow’s future is here today, as virtual cause. And America is neither stronger nor safer than it was yesterday. If anything, it is more precarious than ever because the form under which the promise of tomorrow is here today is ever-present threat. This hinges its actualization on nonlinear and quasicausal operations that no one can fully control, but which, on the contrary, are capable of possessing each and every one, at the level of his or her bodily potential to be individually what will have collectively become.

The outcome is anything but certain. All that is certain is that fear itself will continue becoming—the way of life. The grounding and surrounding fear that the system helps develop tends toward an autonomy that makes it an ontogenetic force to be reckoned with. That reckoning must include the irrational, self-propelling mode of fear-based collective individuation we call fascism. Although there is nothing in the content of any thought that explains why it *should* arise, the passage to a society of that kind is a potential that cannot be excluded. The Bush administration’s fear in-action is a tactic as enormously reckless as it is politically powerful.

Confusingly, it is likely that it can only be fought on the same affective, ontogenetic ground on which it itself operates.

Notes

- 1 “The future will be better tomorrow” is one of the many “Bushisms” circulating in the press and on the Internet. This one appears to be apocryphal. It seems actually to belong to Dan Quayle, vice president under George Bush Sr. As regularly attributed to George W. Bush, however, it squarely belongs to his corpus. For an interactive time line of alert levels since the inception of the system through March 2004, see www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2004/fighting.terror.
- 2 Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 142.
- 3 On the concept of the activation contour, see Stern, *The Interpersonal World*, 57–59.
- 4 George W. Bush addressing the Al Smith Memorial Dinner, New York, October 19, 2000. This scene is memorably included in Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.
- 5 On metastability, see Gilbert Simondon, *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Million, 1995), 72–73, 204–5; and *L’individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 1989), 49, 230–31.
- 6 “Our natural way of thinking about these coarser emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that *the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*. Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful. . . . it makes us realize more deeply than ever how much our mental life is knit

- up with our corporeal frame, in the strictest sense of the term.” William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1950), 449–50, 467.
- 7 On affect as “the primary ground for the continuity of nature,” see Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1938), 183–84; and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 208–18.
- 8 This formula was suggested by Whitehead’s theorization of “the sensa as qualifications of affective tone.” The experience, he writes, “starts as that smelly feeling, and is developed by mentality into the feeling of that smell.” This applies as well to the “affective tones” we call “moods,” which must be considered “direct perceptions . . . on equal terms with the other sensa.” In other words, philosophically, the theory of affect and emotion and the theory of perception strictly coincide. The concept of affective tone will be discussed later in this article. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 246.
- 9 William James, “What is an Emotion?” in *Essays in Psychology*, vol. 13 of *The Works of William James* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 177.
- 10 James, “What is an Emotion?” 170.
- 11 James, “What is an Emotion?” 177.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 On fear as ground of existence and way of life, see Brian Massumi, “Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3–38.
- 14 C. S. Peirce, “Pragmatism,” in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 402. (Emphasis added.)
- 15 Ibid. (Emphasis added.)
- 16 James, “What is an Emotion?” 179.
- 17 All quotations in this paragraph are from C. S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities,” in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 44–46.
- 18 On dephasing, see Simondon, *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, 232, 234–35.
- 19 Simondon, *L’individuation psychique et collective*, 109.
- 20 All quotations in this paragraph are from Simondon, *L’individuation psychique et collective*, 108.