

# David Levi Strauss. *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*. New York: Aperture, 2005.

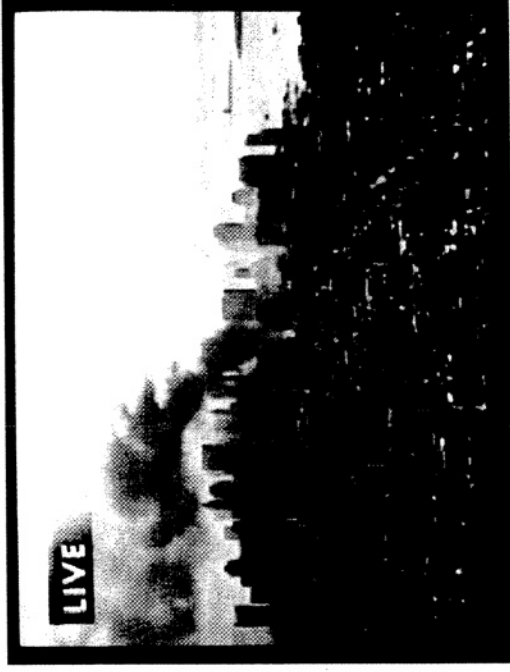
## THE HIGHEST DEGREE OF ILLUSION

*But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence. . . illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.*

—Ludwig Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* (included as epigraph to the first chapter of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*)

Everyone said the same thing after September 11: “It didn’t look real.” They said this whether they had seen it live from a vantage point in lower Manhattan or Brooklyn or watched it “live” on TV, standing up, hands covering their mouths. Someone took a photograph of people standing only blocks away from the event with their backs to the collapsing towers, gazing entranced into a storefront TV. When the second plane hit the second tower, pushing a fireball the size of a false sun out into the bluest sky anyone had ever seen, it was immediately frozen into a still image that could be infinitely reproduced. It was not legible as “reality,” but as representation it was indelible.

The attack on New York’s Twin Towers was the most photographed event in history. It was clearly planned and executed to maximize imaging. The delay between the two crashes seemed calculated to allow cameras—in what is arguably the most densely camera-rich environment in the world—to turn en masse toward the towers like a field of phototropic sunflowers. The “multiplier effect”



that the military craves in weapons design was here accomplished optically. The effect was further enhanced by the luck of a bright fall day with a preternaturally clear sky, and the unusually high number of professional photographers that happened to be on hand. The usually far-flung correspondents of the influential Magnum Photos agency, for instance, had gathered for their annual meeting the night before September 11. One store on Church Street stayed open through the collapse of the towers, and did a brisk business selling disposable cameras, film, and even quick processing to people fleeing the advancing debris cloud. There were so many photographs taken of the event and its aftermath that the *New York Times* changed its policies to include more images. A makeshift archive was opened in a vacant storefront in SoHo to collect photographs of the catastrophe taken by pros and amateurs alike, and huge crowds formed, waiting in lines around the block to offer up their images. On September 11, more people clicked on documentary news photographs than on pornography for the first (and only) time in the history of the Internet. Special issues of picture magazines were rushed into print, including several one-off picture collections published by tabloid media conglomerate American Media, Inc. (AMI), soon to be on the other end of the news when its corporate headquarters in Boca Raton, Florida became the target of the first anthrax letters. The first person to die of anthrax poisoning from these mailed letters was an AMI picture editor who had worked on a "Special Report" issue of the *Globe* featuring a picture of Osama bin Laden on the cover under a banner reading "WANTED! DEAD!" and "BIN LADEN—INSIDE HIS SICK, TWISTED WORLD." The anthrax letters seemed to be a rearguard counterattack against the hegemony of images by the receding word.

In the hours and days following the events, words seemed inadequate and, curiously, too *real* to signify. Only photographs had just enough unreality and distance to "make it real" to us. Seeing is believing, but photographs are more accessible. We don't necessarily believe them, but we accept them. They have become our familiars, domes-

ticated versions of our once wild sight. The terrorists tried to turn our extreme attraction to images of violence and catastrophe against us, but they underestimated the extent to which these images have actually *supplanted* reality for us. They now instill less fear than fascination. Images of the exploding towers have already been used to sell magazines and TV programs. It is only a matter of time before they are used to sell soft drinks and cars.

Before the dust from the towers had settled, talismans of loss—photographs of the missing—began to appear, carried through the streets by stunned survivors who rushed to try to forestall their loss of the *originals*. Hordes of image-bearers fanned out into the city, showing them to anyone who would look: "This is my son. He's a wonderful person. He has black hair and red lips, and two young children." Within days the talismans were transformed into funerary images, but still the living clung to them like life preservers that buoyed them over despair. The *New York Times* began printing these images of the lost, hundreds and thousands of them, day after day. Still they continue.

Our response to all the images of September 11 made it clear how much we still rely on them. All the talk about a "crisis of believability" in photographs seemed far away indeed, and there were very few complaints about "aestheticization."

It's not that we *mistake* photographs for reality; we *prefer* them to reality. We cannot bear reality, but we bear images—like stigmata, like children, like fallen comrades. We suffer them. We idealize them. We believe them because we need what we are in them.