

# Political Semiosis

It might seem easy to determine if we are inside or outside an event. Maybe we think that if we learn about a particular incident via several layers of mediation (the telephone, the radio, the television, the computer screen, the smartphone screen), it means that we are outside the event. Maybe we think that if we are physically distant from the site of rupture (if there is a localized site), it means we are outside. Maybe we think that if we are distant in time from the moment(s) of rupture, it means we are outside. But these determinations are neither easy to make nor clear. Our actual relation to an event can never be assumed or taken for granted.

Like everything else about events, the relationships of individuals, institutions, and collectivities to them are made. And these entities have relative degrees of power in determining their relations to events. Available categories of instigator, perpetrator, participant, victim, witness, and spectator are useful—to a degree. But these categorical identities are charged and ambiguous in their own turn, and no one is simply free to claim them as desired. Especially in the initial phase of an event, such things are just unknown. As promised, the varying political semiotic dynamics of event flow and form will be identified at both the micro and the macro levels—from individuals to nation-states. I begin with the confusions and conundrums of a high school student in Lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. His experiences highlight the cognitive and existential dilemmas involved in determining what, where, and who is inside and what, where, and who is outside an event.<sup>1</sup>

## INSIDE OR OUTSIDE

Sam Faeder was a sixteen-year old student at Stuyvesant High School, four blocks from the World Trade Center, on September 11, 2001. In his recounting, the first indicator of anything out of the ordinary came at around 9:00 a.m., when the school principal's voice came over the intercom speaker in each classroom. The principal called the students' attention to an unusual occurrence, announcing that there had been an accident. It seemed that a small plane had crashed into the Twin Towers of the trade center complex. Students reacted with puzzlement and some murmured expressions of sympathy for the pilot, but the nature of the interruption in their day was not dramatic. Then the teacher in Sam's classroom turned on a television (a second electronic medium of communication). Sam writes: "The class gasps. The live news feed shows the World Trade Center tower burning. I am transfixed by the screen. Breaks from normalcy are rapidly occurring."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the students continued with their schoolwork while the television remained on in the background. Still watching, Sam then saw the second plane come into view onscreen. This brought him to his feet. Students looked at one another with uncertainty about what they had or hadn't seen. The news reporter continued to frame the event as an accident, but one now with an apparent systemic cause—an electronic equipment malfunction of some kind: "We have another copy [of the video], there is the second plane, another passenger plane hitting the World Trade Center. These pictures are frightening indeed. These are just minutes between each other, so naturally, you will guess, you will speculate, and perhaps ask the question, if some type of navigating equipment is awry, that two commuter planes would run into the World Trade Center at the same time."<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on the reporter's hypothesis of equipment failure, maybe in the airplanes' radar system, Sam realized for first time since the morning's events began that he could actually look out the window of his classroom and judge for himself what might be going on. In other words, he remembered that his school was proximal to, perhaps inside, the core zone of the event. And in looking out the window he confirmed that the day was sunny and that radar would not have been necessary to avoid crashing into the towers.

It was at this moment that Sam realized the crashes were purposeful attacks. The time was 9:15 a.m. The principal then came back on the intercom, but persisted in calling the event an "incident." Sam perceived multiple contradictions as the interruptions continued:

Another dichotomy between the message and structure of the announcement. The school pushes forward in official time. The bell sounds, and I pick up my backpack and move into the large orchestra classroom on the south side of the school. I see my friend Geoff coming out of the classroom I am now entering. I tell him I cannot believe what's happening, how crazy this whole morning has been. He looks slightly surprised and says, "What do you mean. The accident?" I realize that Geoff does not know about the second plane or the possible terrorist attack. The television was not turned on in his classroom. Without television, Geoff still lives in the world created by the school's administration. Incidents, regular class time, and single engine airplane accidents.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after, Sam entered another classroom and watched another television, this time transmitting scenes of the Pentagon burning: "I turn around and look out the window, *realizing where I am*. I see the base of the north tower of the World Trade Center a few blocks behind the grassy field by the south side of Stuyvesant High School. I can only see the base of the tower because I am on the street level. Two army helicopters land on the grass. I turn back to the television and see a long shot of the towers burning. I call my parents and leave messages. I tell them I'm okay and that we're staying in the building."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly, the lights in the room began to flicker, and the entire room began to shake. A large piece of a building smashed into the ground outside the window, and smoke billowed toward the window. It was only at this moment that Sam fully realized his material proximity to the event, realized he was, perhaps, even *in the core of* the event. Oddly, he was still also thinking in spectatorial terms—with and through the television and other mass media. For in this moment he was also reminded of the movie *Total Recall*, with its giant cloud smashing a scientific facility on another planet.

Once again, the principal came back on the intercom, this time acknowledging that there had been a terrorist attack on New York City and Washington, DC. He ordered the students to return to their homerooms "at the bell," which still indexed and directed a "normal" day in the institutional life of a high school. From his ninth-floor homeroom, Sam saw one of the Twin Towers still standing, the other apparently hidden behind a massive cloud of smoke (in reality, that tower had already collapsed). Finally, the Principal announced that everyone should exit the school building and head north up the West Side Highway to a meeting point for families. As he walked, Sam encountered a police officer who told him that both towers were gone.

This riveting and self-reflexive account is one that most people would call firsthand. The firsthand account is one that communicates a direct ex-

perience, from whatever subject position. Sam's narrative is riveting partly because of its substantive drama, but also because it so clearly exposes the synaptic network of mediations by and through which Sam seeks to determine the what, where, and who of the event, including his own position inside or outside it. So it is a first-, second-, and thirdhand account all bundled together. The mediations are multiple—several electronic devices (intercom, television, telephone, school bells); the authoritative voice of the principal, with his multiple speech acts (declarations, reassurances, confirmations, and directives); the other students, with their reactions and their own variant information or misinformation; the windows of the classrooms, with their views of the weather, the towers, the helicopters, and the falling debris; and the fictional templates of disaster movies that manage to make sense of the situation in their own ways. Sam's account also explores the way in which consciousness slowly and unevenly determines when a situation is routine, when it is a manageable disruption, and when it is an emergency, or an "event." Sam is turned in one direction and another (literally and figuratively) as he sits down, stands up, gazes at the intercom speaker or the television, encounters friends, decides to pivot to look out the window, runs to the center of the room as it shakes, exits the school building, and walks north. Sam's experience is highly condensed in time and space, yet it contains worlds of perceptions, cognitions, evaluations, and emotions.

Grabbing and keeping the attention of historical subjects, whether they understand themselves to be part of an event or not, is a complex enterprise that encounters incomprehension and resistance of varied sorts. It's time to identify the processes by which event uptake is made possible in precisely such a world, one characterized by distraction and resistance but also by the kinds of reframing susceptibilities to which Sam was subject over the course of a single hour. All the relevant processes are carried out by the elements of political semiosis: performatives, demonstratives, and representations. And in introducing and describing each element, I'll revisit Sam's case and introduce others for the light they shed on political semiotic actions in situ.

#### DECONSTRUCTING POLITICAL SEMIOSIS

There are three basic features of political semiosis—a performative feature, a demonstrative feature, and a representational feature. They work together to shape and mobilize events. In this chapter, I describe each of these features in turn. But it is important to note that there is no logic to the order in which they appear, no set sequence to their interactions. They are uniquely and

contingently activated by event subjects in any given case (though conventions undergird their appearances and operations). Further, while they have distinct ontologies, any particular act can be received, and can thus function, as an occasion of one or another of these features at any given moment of an event's unfolding. This state of uncertainty or undecidability about the status of specific acts is key to the operations of events generally, and many examples of such mutability will be presented.

### Performative

I begin with the performative feature. Events are mobilized by and constituted of speech acts, or their performative equivalents, that materially change the social and/or political world, including the identities of the actors, the relationships among actors, and the relationships between actors and institutions. The foundational analytical reference here is to the theory of performative speech acts associated with the philosopher of language J. L. Austin, most notably in his signature book, *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin originally proposed that performative speech acts are those that change the social world in and through their utterance. A typical example is the statement "We find the defendant not guilty," spoken by a jury foreman to a judge at the end of a trial. Another example is "I now pronounce you husband and wife" (or husband and husband or wife and wife) spoken by a legitimate authority at the conclusion of a marriage ceremony. These statements made at a certain time and place, by a certain authorized speaker, in a certain procedural order, and with a certain attitude do literally change the world of social identities, destinies, and relations.

Austin's analysis of performatives would grow more complex and ultimately incorporate all speech. Along the way, he would adopt a more precise vocabulary for performative speech acts that distinguished among locutions ("the act of 'saying something' in [the] full, normal sense"), illocutions ("performance of an act in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something"); and perlocutions ("what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading").<sup>6</sup> The relations among these three angles of vision onto the actions of performatives become important when considering the *contingent* realities of real-world speech situations. Austin's initial classification of illocutionary acts included five basic categories of speech that he coined: verdictives (findings, acquittals), expositives (affirmations, concessions), exercitives (orders, commands, openings), behabitives (apolo-

gies, protests, felicitations), and commissives (vows, promises).<sup>7</sup> This typology, however disorderly, overlapping, or contested, is a useful starting point for the project of delineating event forms and their capacities.

For example, it's useful to explore the statuses of Sam's high school principal's speech acts under the rubric of Austin's speech act model. The principal starts with an unscheduled *request* for the students' attention (coming at a different point in the day from his usual announcements). Next comes his *assessment* that the plane collision with the Twin Towers was an accident. This is followed later by his *instruction* to move along to the next class without disruption in the schedule, and then by his subsequent *warning* to stay in the building to avoid falling debris. His final speech act is one of *ordering* the students to evacuate and walk north. This collection is replete, then, with verdictives, expositives, and exercitives. But knowing the categories of illocutions uttered tells us only part of the story. We also need to know what the speaker and his listeners *make* of them, and what they then *do* with them.

Part of this other half of the story regards what Austin describes as "the things which are necessary for the smooth or 'happy' functioning of a performative" (including the sincerity and authority of the speaker and the uttering of the illocutions in the proper times, sequence, and places).<sup>8</sup> Such felicity conditions have to be met for performative acts to be successful. Further, the effectiveness of performative speech acts depends on their uptake by social agents (both individual and collective) in structured and institutionalized, but also essentially open and contingent, social worlds. Thus, performatives always pivot on the forces of institutional rules and social conventions on the one side, and the contingent actualities of uptake on the other. Interactional uptake is critical for bridging the existential and empirical pathway between, for example, an illocutionary warning and its perlocutionary success in deterring or warding off some action. Sam and his classmates had to determine if and how to believe and follow the assessments, warnings, and orders of their school's principal. In Sam's case, he had alternative speech acts (from the television or his friends) and his own visual perceptions to contend with and gauge in conjunction with those of his principal.

Performative interactions involve constant chances for misfires, mismatches, or disjunctures as illocutions and perlocutions misalign in practice. Warnings may go unheeded; orders can be ignored. Such lack of alignment between illocutions and perlocutions opens up possibilities for change, redirection, or stalemate. Social agents performing performatives depend on other agents acknowledging and heeding these speech acts, and such things are never guaranteed. Often it is quite the reverse, as when uptake is denied

or deferred as a function of skepticism, ingrained habits, or resistance.<sup>9</sup> In eventful processes, great things can be at stake in performative uptake, including the identity and fate of individuals and collectivities: citizenship, nationality, rights, and obligations all hinge on vows and oaths, judgments, surrenders, declarations, and decrees—and on their recognition and reception.

Of the three features of political semiosis (recalling that the other two are representations and demonstrations), performatives have the most apparent and direct impact on identity. And identities are definitely at stake in events. For example, when the justice of the peace declares, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the identities of the individuals standing in front of him or her do immediately change in obvious and consequential ways. It is important to recognize the multiple and latent identities that all individuals contain, identities called into action or into existence by, among other things, performative speech acts that successfully connect illocutions and perlocutions. Part of Sam’s dilemma was to determine, partly through the aegis of his principal’s speech acts, what his identity was during that hour or so of uncertainty about what was happening at the World Trade Center. Was he a spectator, a witness, or a victim of this event-in-the-making?

The processes leading up to such alchemical transformations of identity may be long in the making, but performatives can effect pivotal moments of transubstantiation. As noted in the introduction, events, with their ruptures and propulsive dislocations, tend to concentrate such identity work. The anthropologist Caroline Humphrey has written incisively about the relationship between events and individual identities: “It will be argued that events bring about the sudden focusing or crystallization of certain of the multiplicities inherent to human life and thus create subjects, if only for a time.”<sup>10</sup> Humphrey’s analytical angle on events, then, involves their tendency to accelerate and concentrate the processes by which certain potential social and political subjects are brought to life, however temporarily.

While an analytical commitment to event multiplicities (at both individual and collective levels) and their performative crystallizations is essential, attempts to name or describe events before they take shape run into problems. Much of events’ eventfulness has to do with their uncertainty, their indeterminate quality. Hence it is crucial to have all available tools with which to lever into the essential real-time dynamic between interpretation and action, the dynamic that opens up a space of contingency and change. I would propose that this dynamic also relies for its production on the other two features of political semiosis—the demonstrative and the representational.

## Demonstrative

At a certain point in the morning's unfolding drama, Sam realizes that he can actually look out the window of his classroom and see the World Trade Center, rather than just hear about it via the intercom or see it on the television screen. In other words, Sam realizes that he is *near* the scene of the incident, maybe inside it—that the scene is *here* rather than *there*. It is not always obvious how near or how far we are from some focal point of action and attention. Much of the work of designating these proximities and distances is done by what I'm calling demonstratives.

Demonstratives index and distinguish proximal and distal entities and relations (in English, for example, the words *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* are demonstratives). Demonstratives also include the features of speech—pronouns (*I* and *you*) and adverbs of time and place (*here*, *there*, *now*, and *then*)—drawn from the linguistic repertoire of deictics, known also as “shifters” or “floaters.” These are the elements of language that shift their referent according to who is uttering them at any given moment of a communicative interaction. I say “I” during my turn of talk, and you say “I” immediately after, during your turn. But we both know who “I” is in any given turn of a conversation. The demonstrative feature of political semiosis calls attention to the situated nature of all events—whether they are conversations or wars. No event can occur outside a context, even as the context itself is constantly shifting (expanding, contracting, incorporating, and expelling), and demonstratives actively reconfigure contexts. Demonstratives highlight orientations within and toward situations.

Event actors and spectators, individuals and collectivities alike, must get their bearings in evolving situations as relations and identities are in the process of transformation; they must determine what is ahead and what is behind (what is still ongoing and what is finished), what is close up and what is far away, what is central and what is marginal. None of these determinations are absolute or automatic.<sup>11</sup> Interactions and interactional dynamics are obviously important in the case of demonstratives, just as they are for the other two features of political semiosis. The very concept of indexicality assumes a subject position that is oriented and aligned toward or away from other subjects, deriving its location and direction relationally from them and vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

Often, demonstratives do their work through symbolic media beyond that of language—gesture or bodily position, for example. Thus, while language manages much of the work of demonstrations, other semiotic systems



and processes are also called into action. As I've begun to show in the initial analysis of *Il quarto stato* (plate 1), such things as postures, body torque, and direction of gait and gaze work to position people toward or away from other people and objects. In the painting, the barefoot woman angles her way and directs her gaze toward the two male leaders while they are looking and moving straight ahead—orthogonal in every way to her proceeding. Thus do the indexical features of multiple semiotic systems provide the grounds, compass points, and interactional vectors for illocutionary acts that can be taken up, ignored, or read against their grain.

Demonstratives engage gear-shifting mechanisms, and can do so to great effect at multiple levels. A moment of collective demonstrative work was displayed, for example, when New York City police officers literally turned their backs on their mayor, William De Blasio, at the funeral of an officer slain on duty in early 2015. This act occurred in the political context of national and local New York City debates about and protests over police use of deadly force against African Americans in late 2014 and early 2015, and De Blasio's own statements about having warned his biracial son about how best to behave near police for his own safety. Turning one's back on someone, particularly someone in a position of authority, is an explicit mode of abnegation, creating a new "us and them" in the process. To show your back to someone, especially someone you are bound by your structural position to respect and obey, is an act of defiance. It also makes peripheral and hence irrelevant that which claims to be central and a focus of attention. It's quite stunning how the simple act of turning around, especially when done by a group in the context of a formal ceremony, can be so effective.

At the macro level of strategy and statesmanship, the same indexical mechanisms are at work. It is easy to underestimate the powers of indexicality, orientation, and attention. But indexical assumptions and choices can beset subjects finding themselves in a newly emerging and transforming historical moment. Indeed, indexical misrecognitions can undermine the aims of actors experiencing and trying to make sense of historic events.

Two documents of nation-statecraft, one an annual strategy report and one an exceptional report on a national crisis, highlight the centrality of the demonstrative feature of political semiosis. The first, US president George H. W. Bush's *National Security Strategy of the United States*, following the template established in previous strategy reports from the executive branch of government, asserts a relational network of sovereign states. Among other things, the report assesses the relationship of *geographical* proximity to *strategic* proximity (as it maps the nation's metaphorical networks of friends, al-

lies, partners, neighbors, competitors, and enemies), explaining at one point that literal distance doesn't signify relational distance: "Many of our closest friends and allies and important economic and political interests are great distances from the US."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, in an oblique acknowledgment that the near and the far had been perilously *misrecognized* in this 1990 strategy report, the official *9/11 Commission Report* from a decade later admonishes, "To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were."<sup>14</sup>

Semiotic systems that establish spatial and temporal binaries, boundaries, rhythms, and coordinates and those that establish networks and genealogies of kinship provide the mechanisms by which we reconfigure our senses of the reasonable and the possible paths, orientations, alignments, and senses of belonging and solidarity. Indexical features like those in the examples above are especially powerful in establishing, and then disturbing, the grounds from which events erupt. They designate the near and the far, the now and the then, the sooner and the later, the us and the them, and the inside and the outside.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, as semiologists have long indicated, *indexical* semiotic mechanisms are just one mode of forging meaningful identities and relations. In delineating the alternatives, the anthropologist Webb Keane writes that "the ground that characterizes and motivates the relationship between sign and object can be iconic (resemblance), indexical (causal or proximal linkages), or symbolic (most evident in 'arbitrary' social conventions)."<sup>16</sup> In Keane's typology, the object itself is recuperated for projects of signification. And this recuperation is compatible with the way that the features of political semiosis mobilize both forms and flows in the contingent evolutions of events.<sup>17</sup> As we move from demonstratives to representations, such additional sign-object relationships as those of the iconic and the symbolic will be highlighted.

### Representational

Every event involves representational features: copies of the event are generated and sent outward into the wider world of audiences and witnesses at a distance. As the representational feature of the political semiosis of events is introduced, we need to keep in mind the complex interplay of all three features in eventful interactions. Think about the "original" documents signed and stamped in official ceremonies, or handshakes tendered or swords un-

sheathed to begin or end battles or wars, or marriages for that matter. All these actions involve performative and demonstrative elements—some that are most obviously performative elements, like signatures, declarations, and commands, and others most recognizably indexical, like mutual alignments of focus, posture, and gesture. And these initiating interactions also contain the most recognizably representational features, like documenting texts and images, including transcripts, photographs, videotapes, paintings, and poems. Copies are produced to communicate the transactions and to make them real.

But some familiar paradoxes are at work here. No event lives for more than an instant without copies, and no event escapes representational transformation. That's because every copy presents something new—whether that newness is a function of its placement in a series, its relation with its new context, the shifting technology of reproduction, or something else.<sup>18</sup>

In a profoundly social sense, all ideas about permanent form taking are futile, and an inevitable dialectic exists between the sedimentation and re-direction of forms and meanings.<sup>19</sup> The representational feature draws from theories of mimesis and on the circulatory power of the copy, reiterating an event or identity across time and space. The representations thus recruited for the enactment of the world-changing performatives participate in another dialectic that characterizes events: convention and contingency. Copies attempt to stabilize and sediment the historical transition in the face of uncertainty, distance, and resistance.

Among the first and most important representations of an event are those that label the emergence as an event of a particular kind. In other words, event categories are deployed to answer the question, what is this? A big part of the reason that events are so disorienting and uncomfortable is that no immediate or clear answer to that question is available. Sometimes, as William Sewell Jr. and others have argued for the term *revolution*, an entirely new term must be conceived or reimaged to capture the novelty of the happening. We may recall our own initial categorical conundrums, similar perhaps to Sam's, upon learning of the two airplanes flying into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center complex. Labels for this event came and went throughout the morning of September 11, 2001: an accident, an incident, a terrorist attack, an act of war. Various voices, authoritative and not, offer various representations. They mobilize their own brands of performative felicities, their own chosen evidence, to make their labels stick. But as with illocutionary speech acts, uptake is critical for the representations put forward. An interviewee in a post-9/11 study of Manhattan residents

retraces his own conceptual pathway from resistance toward acceptance of an authoritative representational frame of *war* for the actions of that day:

It's weird because it didn't feel like it was that big when that first plane hit and I saw it. And even when the second plane hit and I knew that it was *terrorism* and I heard the reports of the Washington, DC, *thing*. Even at that point it didn't seem like the *world-changing event*. I don't know why . . . I don't know if it was because of the buildings falling and the scope of how many people were killed. I don't think it was that. . . . The first time Bush used the word *war* I was surprised. And I said, "This is not really war, like an *active war*." But then he started to say we're at war and I was "We're at war, against who?" But now it really does feel like it was an act of war and I started to convince myself those planes are *bombs*; it's the same as bombing those buildings. In fact, it's even more egregious because those bombs were loaded with people so yeah; I see that it's *war*.<sup>20</sup>

Several alternative representations have to be considered and rejected for this person to accept that war is the appropriate frame for this event rather than thing, accident, crime, or terrorist act—the scale and scope of the actions must be recalibrated (not just one building but two; not just New York but also Washington, DC); the usual requirement of an established and recognized enemy is foregone, though the indexing of “we” and “them” persists; the nature of bombs is rethought (now airplanes can be bombs). Considerable labor is involved in these recalibrations and reconceptualizations. Even the very concept of war requires cognitive work. According to this man, wars need to be active. They need an identified enemy. They need recognizable weapons of a military grade. The processes of shaping and connecting the forms which appear as this event-in-the-making are gradual and iterated and include performative and demonstrative as well as representational modes of political semiosis.

Identities are implicated in these representational processes as well. As evidenced in Sam's case, both individual and event identities require codification. Accompanying questions about *what* is happening are questions about to *whom* it is happening. In a poignant study by Alexandra Delano and Benjamin Niemass of undocumented workers in the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks, the authors examine the oscillations of post-9/11 perception and recognition of these individuals as their profiles were enhanced or degraded by times (e.g. those who worked the “graveyard shift,” when the buildings were depopulated), spaces, and laws: “The case of the possibly

unacknowledged victims of 9/11 reveals the difficulties undocumented migrants have ‘switching’ into a public existence even in a moment of collective tragedy, and even when agencies had suspended some of their restrictions in the wake of the attacks and temporarily recognized ‘the space occupied by the legally nonexistent.’”<sup>21</sup> Procedures for naming, counting, and compensating these victims and their families in the aftermath of the attacks thus depended on their coming into focus as being among the recognizably near and familiar us, not them. Here as well, the demonstrative mechanisms of orientation and localization were centrally involved in these processes along with the representational acts of naming the undocumented as victims.

It should be recalled that representations have their own mimetic ontologies and qualities, and relatively stable institutional alliances. The work of *genre* is particularly important for the representational feature of political semiosis. Of course, as scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin have noted, concepts like genre have many meanings and functions.<sup>22</sup> A useful, if provisional, characterization of genre is that put forward by the literary theorist Franco Moretti; it is one that is relevant to this book’s “quantum” approach to events. Moretti proposes that we understand genres as “temporary structures within the historical flow . . . where flow and form meet.”<sup>23</sup> Aesthetic genres such as narrative, drama, poetry, painting, and photographs, and sub-genres within these such as lyric poetry or history painting, differentially contain and construe time, space, action, and causality. Thus, specifying generic differences is central to the analysis of events taking shape and getting on the move.<sup>24</sup>

In mass media communications, for instance, the genre of breaking news provides banner headlines (on television, computer, and mobile phone screens), news anchor characterizations of emerging situations, and on-site reporter interviews.<sup>25</sup> Social and political subjects viewing and taking in this relay from one representational form and speech situation to another do indeed take meaning from the “breaking news” frame. But it is also the case that each site and type of intervention has its own generic characteristics—the telegraphic iconography and discourse of newspaper headlines, the mobility of news crawlers at the bottom of television and computer screens, and the (at least formally) dialogic interview with on-the-ground witnesses or authorities produce the event differently, even as they work as an ensemble.

As noted, genres operate in multiple social and political spheres, and their specificity also needs to be illuminated vis-à-vis these distinct domains. The sociologist Jeffrey Olick, for example, has developed a sophisticated understanding of the contingent work of genre in official state commemorative

discourse. He extends Bakhtin's approach "with its axiomatic emphasis on dialogue and on genre [in ways] . . . that simultaneously [take] into account its conjunctural (politics of commemoration), developmental (history of commemoration), and dialogic (memory of commemoration) dimensions."<sup>26</sup> Olick's approach situates genres within the sphere of politics and within the developmental and dialogical frames that reflect the ways generic forms evolve. Capacities of genre but also their limitations are thus recognized as functions of their times and institutional settings.

Consider the case of the production of the official *9/11 Commission Report* mentioned earlier. The 567-page document details the events of September 11, 2001, incorporating analyses of the Federal Aviation Association, the New York Police and Fire Departments, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, among others. It also details the histories of al-Qaeda, the phenomenon it terms "New Terrorism," counterterrorism, American intelligence agencies, the Clinton administration's actions (and inactions) on terrorism, and the George W. Bush administration's actions (and inactions) on the same, then ends with a series of proposals. But the first chapter of this report, titled "We Have Some Planes," is entirely dedicated to the narration of the four airplane hijackings. Each flight is described as beginning on a clear September morning, and each goes through the process of screening and boarding passengers. Each plane's detailed fate is presented as an integral and distinct whole, each equally deserving of its own narrative rendering (as is each respective set of victims). No one sequence of events is privileged over another, as each plane gets its due. But the egalitarianism of the narrative confronts the generic capacities (and limitations) of the narrative form. The diachrony of language precludes expressions of simultaneity, thereby creating political dilemmas in its own turn. Because when the political stakes in expressing simultaneity are high, as they were in codifications of the 9/11 attack temporalities (the four airplanes were hijacked more or less simultaneously, precluding US authorities from intervening and stopping the attack), such generic incapacities are obviously important—epistemologically and politically.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond their specific qualities, it is also true that the representational forms must circulate if the event is going to continue its life. Thus, consideration of the event representations must also include their technologies of circulation. Scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Jonathan Crary, and Zeynep Gursel have written about the representational and circulatory capabilities and operations of the printing press, the newspaper, the camera obscura, the television, and the wire service, among other (at one time) revolu-

tionary technologies. Paying close attention to the variable and evolving nature of these technologies provides another opportunity to see how the demonstrative and the representational features of political semiosis work in tandem.

This insight is actually anticipated in Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's classic work, *Media Events*, when they insist on the importance of taking media technology into account:

That media events can talk over and around conventional political geography reminds us that media technology is too often overlooked by students of media effects in their distrust of hypotheses of technological determinism. Papyrus and ancient empire, print and the Protestant Reformation, the newspaper and European nationalism, the telegraph and the economic integration of American markets, are links between attributes of communication technologies and social structures. They connect portability, reproducibility, linearity, simultaneity, on the one hand, to empire, church, nation, market, on the other.<sup>28</sup>

As Dayan and Katz note, there are “natural” connections between specific media technology capacities and specific social and political institutions (including the connection illuminated by Benedict Anderson between the simultaneity of newspaper distribution, reading habits, and the nation). Of course, not all technologies and the communicative genres they generate coordinate seamlessly with all social institutions or worldviews. This study will draw attention to specific genres and forms that emerge in events, will highlight their representational capacities, and will track their coordinations as well as their misalignments with social and political institutions and identities.<sup>29</sup>

Myriad contingencies will affect the ways that any given exemplar of any given genre will carry events forward. Some of these are certainly contained in the ontological nature of the genre or form itself; some are a function of the associated technologies of circulation or the interactions of various forms with each other in the eventful handoffs in which they participate; some are contingent on the uptake or resistance by political-historical agents in the worlds in which the forms circulate.<sup>30</sup> In any given case of the emergence and circulation of events, an analyst should aim to be responsible to all these contingencies. It will never be possible to drill down into the endlessly subdividing elements of individual genres or to expand upward and outward to all possible and actual historical subjects participating in the conveyance of the event. Nevertheless, tracking events where and how they come to life takes seriously the specificity of forms and the trajectories of flows. In the case of analyzing events through the workings of the features of political

semiosis, the actors include the forms enlisted by social and political agents in the performative, demonstrative, and representational actions.<sup>31</sup>

#### SUMMARY

The features of political semiosis thus possess different operational logics. But they operate conjointly to produce events. Effectiveness via uptake is key here and can never be assumed in advance, even on the basis of all the Austinian felicity conditions (sincerity, authority, conventionality, and contextual appropriateness) being met. There are social and political forces—structures, agents, institutions—that vie with themselves and among themselves to acknowledge or ignore the imprecations and interventions of the event's performatives, demonstratives, and representations.

Within the complex, uncertain, and emerging world of events, the specific function of any particular word, phrase, image, or gesture is ambiguous—it remains to be decided. A form deployed may operate as a performative, a demonstrative, or a representation—with varying consequences. We return to the example of framing an event as a war (introduced in the excerpt from the study of New York City residents post-9/11). What is a war? When is a war?<sup>32</sup> A common phrase like “winning the war” might have multiple meanings and impacts. War metaphors are frequently deployed in political and policy rhetoric (“war against crime” and “war against poverty”). More apparently, literal wars involving traditional military actions associated with territorial defense and conquest can also have ambiguous meaning and ontological standing—are they officially declared, are they locatable in time and space? In the context of the contemporary continuous and global “wars on terror,” more traditional threshold acts of war making (declaration and territorial conquests) have been elided. Thus, in such an unconventional context, a phrase like “winning the war” *might* function representationally, describing a state of affairs; or it might function demonstratively (the “now” of war versus the “before” of peace); or, if spoken by someone with the authority to wage war, it could stake a performative claim as an actual declaration of war (as long as there is perlocutionary uptake).

What's interesting is that the status of this phrase as a speech act is undecidable and is contingent upon its uptake—or not—by other branches of government, by allies aligned or aligning into a coalition, by a public willing to enlist in the military to fight, and by enemies identified as targets. It is often in such discursive moments that the interplay of the performatives, the demonstratives, and the representations is at its most elemental



and consequential. In this way, a nation-state might reorient its vision, its commitments, its sense of time and history and space and boundaries. It also reanimates and reconfigures its collective identity. The approach that I am outlining avoids the split advanced by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in which events are understood as constitutive and active rather than representational and reactive. Events must contain all four characteristics, even as they elude permanent fixing.

The elements of novelty and recombinatorial possibilities are important here. One consequence of the open-endedness and mutability of event formation and flow is that they provide opportunities for the invention of new ideas, concepts, institutions, and identities. This corresponds with William Sewell Jr.'s analysis of the eventful invention of revolution in France in the summer of 1789. In his justly famous article, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures," Sewell proposes a process of *semiotic rearticulation* as the central mechanism for the eventful emergence of the new. In the case of the French Revolution, this took the form of "a semantic condition that made the new articulation of popular violence and popular sovereignty possible: the long-standing ambiguity of the term 'le peuple'—the people . . . [and thus] the taking of the Bastille . . . as the historical event that articulates popular violence with the nation's sovereign will in the new concept of revolution."<sup>33</sup> Precisely these kinds of articulations and rearticulations take enormous effort across multiple domains, and the deployment of objects and acts under the frames of icons, resemblances, symbols, and more. Sewell presents several conditions attendant on this invention of revolution in the French case, including the public elaboration of various rituals of solidarity. He also hits upon the fact that fusion or synthesis of forms is involved in the novelty of events—in the case of the French Revolution, it is that fusion of popular violence and popular sovereignty. Nevertheless, in the terms being developed here, a combination of performative, demonstrative, and representational effectiveness comes into play, though uptake is required.<sup>34</sup>

When all the machinery of political semiosis coordinates to constitute an event, one that is widely recognized, a turning point is understood to have occurred. Turning points, as noted earlier, play a central role in scholarly analyses of events.<sup>35</sup> The bottom line is that societies require a cognitive and perceptual apparatus to integrate ruptures into linear time, epochal time, directional time, prefigured time (both sacred and secular versions), and so forth.

However that apparatus is organized and however the attendant epistemological regimes cohere, they must do so in the context and against the backdrop of some ground of being, from which all events spring.