

“A certain distance leads to a certain obscurity”:
The Invisible Committee discovers America

One of the most memorable things I experienced when I first visited Disneyland in 1993 was the robotic “simulation” of Abraham Lincoln. I’d read Jean Baudrillard’s comments about the place in general (“Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland”).¹ It was also Baudrillard, if I’m not mistaken, who’d written about the Abraham Lincoln exhibit, which was described as the perfect symbol of the total and irreversible victory of simulation over reality; the destruction of living history and its recreation as a non-living spectacle, and so forth. Though no pictures of the ghastly thing were provided, the impression I was left with was that it must have been a truly terrifying monster.

But when I finally found myself in front of it, all I could do was laugh. Far from being “life like,” it was *obviously* a machine and, what was worse, it moved and spoke awkwardly, in fits and starts, and looked like it might break down at any moment. It immediately became obvious to me that Baudrillard himself had never seen the allegedly terrible thing that he’d written about; he’d simply read about it somewhere, and believed everything that he’d gleaned from his reading. In the words of Greil Marcus, Baudrillard “might not have stepped on a single ride at all.”²

Like Baudrillard, the Invisible Committee (IC) has a lot to say about America. Or, rather, the IC often refers to events that have happened in America. And when it does, the members of the IC, like Baudrillard, reveal themselves to be *even worse than tourists*, who at least get on the rides at the places they visit.

In *The Coming Insurrection* (published in French in 2007 and in English in 2009),³ we learn that, in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, “the Common Ground Clinic was set up. From the very first days, this veritable ‘country hospital’ provided free and effective treatment to those who needed it, thanks to the constant influx of volunteers” (83). Aware of the serious problem that the IC’s complacent reference to “the constant influx of volunteers” would cause among the Americans readers who already knew something about the Common Ground clinic, the translator or publisher of the American edition of *The Coming*

¹ *Simulacra and Simulations* (Autonomedia, 1981).

² “Forty Years of Overstatement: Criticism and The Disney Theme Parks,” in *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, edited by Karal Ann Marling (Flammarion, 1998).

³ Page references in what follows are to the Semiotext(e) edition, 2009.

Insurrection made sure to point out in a footnote that “a certain distance leads to a certain obscurity.” Which is an evasive way of saying, “When you weren’t there, and you have to rely on other people’s accounts (perhaps even a single one), you are bound to make mistakes.” The rest of the footnote says, “It was later revealed that one of the main spokesmen [*sic*] for the project, Brandon Darby, was an FBI informant.”

Thirty pages later, the IC tells us, “the devastation of New Orleans by hurricane Katrina gave a certain fringe of the North American anarchist movement the opportunity to achieve an unfamiliar cohesion by rallying all those who refused to be forcefully evacuated” (120). Outside of the fact that this “unfamiliar cohesion” happened to include an FBI informant, this bit of political gossip doesn’t speak about objective facts, but subjective impressions (the feelings of cohesion among the anarchists), which of course are even harder, if not impossible, to verify by someone who wasn’t there.

The Coming Insurrection tells us, “the waves of arrests of anarchists in Italy and of eco-warriors in the US were made possible by wiretapping” (116). Because no other information about these arrests is relayed, it is impossible to determine to which “eco-warriors in the US” the IC is referring (Judi Bari? Daniel McGowan?). As result, the assertion that “wiretapping” was the reason that these people were arrested cannot be accepted without other information. Unfortunately, the translator/publisher doesn’t provide it, either.

Finally, *The Coming Insurrection* relates the following edifying story: “At the end of June 2006 in the State of Oaxaca, the occupations of city halls multiply, and insurgents occupy public buildings. In certain communes, mayors are kicked out, official vehicles are requisitioned. A month later, access is cut off to certain hotels and tourist compounds. Mexico’s Minister of Tourism speaks of a disaster ‘comparable to hurricane Wilma’” (124). The IC doesn’t seem to know that, just three months after that wonderful moment (and well before the IC completed work on its manuscript), Brad Will – an unarmed young American activist from New York City – was shot and killed in Oaxaca. His murder remains unsolved. Once again, neither the translator nor the publisher deemed it important to use a footnote to relay any of this obviously important information.

Though the IC wrote a new preface for the January 2009 reprint of *The Coming Insurrection*, it did not take that occasion to correct any of its mistakes or omissions.

To Our Friends, published in French in 2014 and in English in 2015,⁴ is the IC's follow-up to its first book. It, too, is filled with mistaken assertions about what things are really like in America.

To Our Friends contains the bold assertion that, contrary to the famous slogan of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) that "We are the 99%," "in the United States the wealthy are far more than 1%" (17). The IC cites no statistics or sources to support its assertion. But the simple fact of the matter is that, in America, "the wealthy" are in fact *super wealthy* and account for *less* than 1% of the population. And it was precisely due to this fact that the "We are the 99%" was a poorly chosen slogan to begin with. It didn't take into account the super concentration of wealth among the super rich.⁵ But instead of having OWS proclaim, "We are the 99.9%," which would have been more accurate, the IC would have had it say, "We are the 98% if not even less than that."

Then there's that business about zombies.

At the end of 2012, the highly official American Centers for Disease Control circulated a graphic novel for a change. Its title: *Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse*. The idea is simple: the population must be prepared for any eventuality, a nuclear or natural catastrophe, a general breakdown of the system or an insurrection. The document concludes by saying: 'If you're ready for a zombie apocalypse then you're ready for any emergency.' The zombie figure comes from Haitian voodoo culture. In American films, masses of rebellious zombies chronically function as an allegory of the threat of a generalized insurrection by the black proletariat. So *that* is clearly what people must be *prepared* for. (27)

Yes, that's right: the members of the IC *didn't get the joke*. It appears they didn't know that, in American popular culture, "the zombie figure" has been around for so long that it has become a frequent target for parody, and even a vehicle for comedy. The clever people at the CDC knew that, of course. Furthermore, it seems

⁴ Page references in what follows are to the Semiotext(e) edition, 2015, translated by Robert Hurley.

⁵ "The super-rich, according to [Leonard] Beeghly, are those able to live off their wealth without depending on occupation-derived income. This demographic constitutes roughly 0.9% of American households. Beeghly's definition of the super-rich is congruent with the definition of upper class employed by most other sociologists. The top .01 percent of the population, with an annual income of \$9.5 million or more, received 5% of the income of the United States in 2007. These 15,000 families have been characterized as the 'richest of the rich.'"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_upper_class.

that the members of the IC don't know that, at least since George Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), "masses of rebellious zombies" have in fact risen from the dead due to nuclear radiation. There are certainly interesting race-related questions posed by Romero's film, but the idea that the CDC is in fact preparing the white bourgeoisie to counter the "threat of a generalized insurrection by the black proletariat" is certainly unsubstantiated and quite possibly preposterous.

Worst of all there's the IC's cute story about how Occupy Wall Street came to use the technique called the "mic check."

[...] the model for the speeches made to the 1500 persons present was the guy who stepped forward one day and said, 'Yo! What up? My name is Mike. I'm just a gangster from Harlem. I hate my life. Fuck my boss! *Fuck my girlfriend!* Fuck the cops! Just wanted to say, I'm happy to be here, with you all.' And his words were repeated *seven times* by the chorus of 'human megaphones' that had replaced the microphones prohibited by the police (48, emphasis added).

Yes, that's right: the members of the IC have confused "mic" (short for microphone) with "Mike" (short for Michael). They think the phrase "mic check" is a reference or tribute to "Mike," the guy – *the gangster from Harlem* (thank you, Central Casting) – who inadvertently helped invent it. And Mike was quite a fellow, wasn't he? Shouting out "Fuck my girlfriend!" like that. And those 1,500 people, a few of whom were probably women, were pretty cool, too, because they were happy to repeat, "Fuck my girlfriend!" over and over again, seven times in fact (two or three times is the usual practice), until each and every person had heard and understood it. I don't know what's worse: the idea that the members of the IC came up with this pathetic nonsense on their own, or that someone – perhaps someone who, betting on their credulity, tried to play a practical joke on them – relayed it to them and they, believing it to be true, put it in their book.

It seems appropriate to end this list of embarrassments with the IC's second reference to the events in Oaxaca in 2006, in part because it is yet another mistaken or shallow reference to events in North America, and in part because it shows that the IC hadn't learned anything new about Oaxaca since 2007, when it last offered its comments on the subject.

It's easy to understand, for example, why the Oaxaca Commune immediately declared itself peaceful. It wasn't a matter of refuting war, but of refusing to be defeated in a confrontation with the Mexican state and its henchmen (139).

A cringe-inducing remark, given that Brad Will was in fact shot in “a confrontation with the Mexican state and its henchmen.”

I don’t mean to suggest that America is somehow a “difficult place to understand if you don’t come from there” and *that’s* why the Invisible Committee is clueless about it, or that the IC only makes egregious mistakes when it speaks about America and that it is perceptive and accurate when it comes to other countries. All “foreign” countries are hard to understand for people who aren’t native to them, and the IC makes egregious mistakes when it refers to events in other countries, as well.

What I believe I have demonstrated here is that, in order to obtain the “*distinctly global* perspective” that, according to the IC, is the “only” perspective that “can capture” the “significance” of “what is happening in the world since 2008” (*To Our Friends*, 15), the IC has had to remain at the lofty level of bumbling superficialities. They rely rather heavily on “news reports” (political gossip) – that is, when they aren’t parroting what they’ve read in Michel Foucault’s books – and they rarely seem to question or criticize what they are relaying, especially when it comes from “experts” in their fields. If it fits the point the IC is trying to make, it’s used.

“With every manifestation of our party,” the IC writes, “whether it’s in the form of a plaza occupation, a wave of riots, or a deeply moving phrase tagged on a wall, the feeling spreads that it’s definitely ‘we’ that’s at stake, *in all those places where we’ve never been*” (*To Our Friends*, 194, emphasis added). There is only one exception to this rule. “And Maidan? What does one say about Maidan? One would have to go see. One would have to go make contact” (*To Our Friends*, 230).

If I wanted to, I could also demonstrate that, at the level of critical theory, the IC’s “*distinctly global* perspective” is a superficial, pretentious and mistake-ridden *mélange* of concepts and jargon taken from the writings of Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Guy Debord, Karl Marx and Gershom Scholem. Because no real attempt has been made to harmonize these borrowed fragments, the final result is very often self-contradictory and even incoherent. But coherence is not something that the IC strives to attain. Where revolutionaries are concerned, “It’s through *attention to the phenomenon*, through their sensitive qualities that they will manage to become a real power, and not through ideological coherence” (*To Our Friends*, 195). And yet the members of the IC are completely convinced that *they are better* – better theoreticians, better revolutionaries, better people – than everyone else.

But it’s not worth wasting any more time writing about their books, which are crap. By way of conclusion, I will note that the only reason that the members of the IC have been able to get away with their arrogant buffooneries is that absolutely no one was able to measure their theories (the contents of their books)

against how they actually lived as people. And this despite the fact that the adequation between theory and practice is their mantra and litmus test for others.

Indeed, once the Tarnac 9 were arrested for allegedly sabotaging a TGV line in November 2008, no one but the cops would admit to being interested in establishing the “real” identities of the members of the IC, who’d written about such sabotage in *The Coming Insurrection*. Under those conditions, trying to find out the identities of the IC’s members – not in order to prove that they were saboteurs or terrorists, but simply in order to evaluate the various claims, assurances, and dismissals made in their books *ad hominem* – was not an easy thing to do, at least not tactfully. The IC itself provided no help whatsoever, just obfuscations: “This book is signed in the name of an imaginary collective. Its contributors are not its authors” (*The Coming Insurrection*, 28).

But now that the Tarnac Affair is finally ending, the question of the identities of the members of the IC will return in full force. It will be answered, one way or the other. And when it has been answered – that is to say, when it has been shown that there is substantial overlap, if not an identity, between the members of the IC and the Tarnac collective (if you read their respective writings carefully, this is *obviously* the case) – their readers will finally be able to recognize and criticize the divergences between their theory and their practice. Their readers will be able to say, “Don’t tell us how awful every single radical milieu is; your milieu is just as bad as everyone else’s.” The mystique and allure of “The Invisible Committee” will vanish overnight.

When they write under their own names and about issues that concern them personally,⁶ the members of the Tarnac 10 are excellent theorists and commentators. But judging by the poor quality of the three texts⁷ that weren’t included in *“I have spoken and saved my soul”*: *Statements by the Tarnac 10* on the grounds that they concerned general matters and not the specifics of the Tarnac Affair, the decomposition of their writing under their real names has already begun.

Bill Brown
17 September 2015

⁶ Cf. *“I have spoken and saved my soul”*: *Statements by the Tarnac 10*, ed. and trans. Bill Brown (Colossal Books, 2015).

⁷ “Leaving the logic of security behind” (<http://www.notbored.org/security-logic.pdf>); “Counter-Terrorism: It doesn’t judge enemies; it fights them” (<http://www.notbored.org/counter-terrorism.pdf>) and “Open letter to *Charlie Hebdo*” (<http://www.notbored.org/charlie.pdf>).

Note: I wrote this text because I felt I needed to balance the way I present the texts written by the Tarnac 10 and published in “*I have spoken and saved my soul.*” My presentation of these statements is quite positive; despite their faults, they are in fact very well-written, coherent, and convincing. I did not publish their writings in order to shoot them down: I published them so that they could be read and appreciated for their undeniable merits. But I didn’t want to give the impression that I was unaware of or was ignoring the really serious problems with the writings published by The Invisible Committee, who, as everyone knows, are one, several or all of the Tarnac 10. And so I opted for a second and “separate” text that isn’t in fact separate: it refers to the new book and, on the other hand, the intro to the new book refers directly to the texts not included in the book because they weren’t relevant to the Tarnac Affair itself. It is my hope that these two, interrelated texts offer a more balanced perspective: critical when the IC talks superficially about generalities, and positive when the Tarnac 10 talks about specifics in a very meaningful way.