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TERRORISM AND LITERARINESS

THE TERRORIST EVENT IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES
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Terrorism and Literariness:
The terrorist event in the 20th and 21st centuries
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>Anno Domini</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Before Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>EOKA</td>
<td>National Organization of Cypriot Fighters</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETA</td>
<td>Euskadi Ta Askatasuna</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIFA</td>
<td>Federation Internationale de Football Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLN</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSRA</td>
<td>Hindustan Socialist Republican Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRA</td>
<td>Irish Republican Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISF</td>
<td>Islamic Salvation Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIL</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>New York City</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFLP</td>
<td>Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLO</td>
<td>Organization for the Liberation of Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAF</td>
<td>Red Army Faction</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>Students for a Democratic Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Situationist International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>World Trade Center</td>
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INTRODUCTION

On 7 July 2005, four British citizens of Islamist origin bombed the London Underground as well as a double-decker bus in a suicide mission that instantly killed fifty-two civilians and injured seven hundred more, in England’s worst terrorist incident in two decades. This is how Mohammed Sidique Khan, one of the bombers, accounted for the outrageous act in a message that was transmitted through Al-Jazeera across the globe:

I'm going to keep this short and to the point because it’s all been said before by far more eloquent people than me. But our words have no impact upon you therefore I’m going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood. I'm sure by now the media's painted a suitable picture of me, this predictable propaganda machine will naturally try to put a spin on things to suit the government and to scare the masses into conforming to their power and wealth-obsessed agendas. . . . Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. . . . This is how our ethical stances are dictated. Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people and your support of them makes you directly responsible. . . . We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.¹

Khan was already dead when this video-taped message was broadcast by all media networks of the planet. His death, of course, does not legitimize his claims. Still, regardless of whether one subscribes to some (or all) of the ideas articulated in the message or not, it has to be admitted that Khan’s manifesto “neatly” encapsulates the major questions posed by the problem of terrorism today. Khan mysteriously talks about “ethics” while leading innocent people to their untimely deaths. How can you talk about ethics while being strapped to explosives that are just about to wreak chaos upon unsuspecting victims? He appears scornful of democracy because, as he implies, it is just a pretext for being tyrannical towards other nations or religions, and holds
everyone responsible for the actions carried out by democratically-elected regimes. Moreover, he legitimates his atrocious deed as an act of just war, while proclaiming himself to be a mere soldier fighting for a higher cause. The reference to the role of the media as an agency of misrepresentation and distortion exemplifies ultramodern terrorism’s serious preoccupation with its own image—Khan seems disdainful of the media as propagandist machines while paradoxically wasting a large portion of his message on them, let alone speaking through them—as well as its absolute awareness of the fact that (TV, video and internet) images are very important terrorist tools because they help disseminate around the globe the causes and the shocking effects of a certain terrorist incident.

The present study on terrorism will focus precisely on issues incidentally raised in the London bomber’s message above; issues related to “dead words” that are enlivened by “bloody” actions, the role of language and media rhetoric in discrediting or advertizing terrorism, the paradoxical immanence of “ethics” and politics in terrorist activity, the image of the terrorist as “a soldier at war” fighting non innocent noncombatants and, very importantly, the role of aesthetics in comprehending terrorist action as well as representing the figure of the terrorist. Different aspects of terrorism will be analyzed from various perspectives, with the assistance of philosophical, literary and political texts written by such eminent theorists/intellectuals as Slavoj Zizek, Jean Baudrillard, J. F. Lyotard, and others. One of the main objectives of this study is the investigation of the affinity between literary/philosophical thought and the concept of terrorism. This phenomenon of extreme asymmetric violence will be studied both, through philosophy/literature and as (a form of) literature and philosophy, to the extent that literary thinking, what I more broadly call “literariness,” already lurks in the discourse, representation, as well as the very practice of terrorism. For instance, symbolism, theatrical display and rhetorical skills admittedly permeate the terrorist mindset. In this light, special attention will be paid also to the interrelatedness between aesthetics and terror or terrorism as the latter developed from the late nineteenth century onwards. By the term “aesthetics,” this study does not mean “beauty” but rather focused perceptual or artistic sensibility. The perceptual or aesthetic, in the sense of “feeling,” is crucial for understanding and accurately representing terrorism, whereas journalistic language and reasoned political and sociological discourse, due to their lack of faith in the power of imagination, cannot
fully grasp the immensity, terrible immediacy, radical symbolism and “literariness” of a terrorist act.

But before proceeding to discuss the faces and practices of terrorism, we need to determine the nature of the phenomenon. What exactly is terrorism and what counts as a “terrorist act”? There must be more than a hundred definitions of the term, which demonstrates the difficulty of arriving at a safe conclusion as to an all-inclusive definition as well as the ambiguity and contradictoriness amongst several of them. Nonetheless, if one must give a definition of terrorism, one should certainly include in it the elements that are commonly found in the majority, if not all, of terrorist events. Jessica Stern provides us with the following definition: “[Terrorism is] an act or threat of violence against noncombatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience.” She adds that such a definition “avoids limiting perpetrator or purpose.” True, but if we shrug off the question of who commits that violence and to what purpose, don’t we oversimplify the essence of the problem? Stern’s catch-all definition ends up disregarding two very important qualities inherent in the phenomenon of terrorism: the political, and the asymmetric. An act of terrorism, that is, usually associates itself with political agendas and motivations (or at least, it claims it does); moreover, its intention is to take a society (community, group, entity, etc.) by surprise as an imponderable, asymmetric factor that disrupts the normal cycle of human activity, an extremely violent otherness that feels “unprecedented” to the human mind. So, Stern’s word choice—“an act or threat of violence”—is not so apposite insofar as it does not allow for the suddenness and apparent irrationality of terrorism.

Albeit deficient in some respects, Stern’s conception of the phenomenon is successful in addressing one key point. She acknowledges that terrorists hit noncombatants in order to influence an audience. In other words, a theatrics of terrorist violence is already built into its very structure. Other definitions of terrorism concede its political dimension but focus on its inherent illegitimacy and immorality. Ted Honderich, for instance, argues that it constitutes unconventional and illegal (still, political) activity that is morally reprehensible. Perhaps the underlying assumption here would be, mistakenly, that conventional war is not morally reprehensible because it is not, strictly speaking, illegal—it has somehow been agreed upon by the two adversaries. The politically-contested nature of the term “terrorism” leads to the
conflation of “its descriptive and normative uses” in “the public discourse,” argues Peter Neumann:

For some, terrorism describes a particular type of violent activity but implies no opinion or judgment about the righteousness of the act or the cause for which it was committed. For others, it is a word of condemnation reserved for all kinds of actions that are considered illegitimate and morally reprehensible. Hence, whereas for the latter, “terrorist” and “freedom fighter” are mutually exclusive, in the eyes of the former, one may well be a terrorist and a freedom fighter at the same time.⁵

Some terrorists “recognize no moral law” because they have their own superior or “higher” morality.⁶ Igor Primoratz has come up with a simple but comprehensive rule for what terrorism might really be. According to him, it is “the deliberate use of violence, or threat of its use, against innocent people, with the aim of intimidating some other people into a course of [political] action they otherwise would not take.”⁷

However hard critics have tried, they have not been able to coin a definition that will absolutely do justice to the idea that we have in mind when we use that term. Not only do such attempts fail, but it seems that the more concise the rule the more shaky the ground upon which it rests. On closer inspection, it comes down to the—shaky or not—moral ground that we stand upon, because, as George Fletcher states emphatically: “Were the American revolutionaries not terrorists? Did they not fight without wearing uniforms? Did they not conduct unorthodox raids against English regulars marching in uniform? Were we engaged in an act of terror when we dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?”⁸ In other words, we, Westerners, frequently lack the will to assign a terrorist status equally to friend and foe, which is clearly a case of double standards. For now, suffice it to say that terrorism is not an ideology or a political system to which one could subscribe; rather, it is a tactic, a conspiratorial game, a quasi-erratic methodology. And while it does not count as “ideology,” yet, it embodies “the pursuit of ideological ends through other means. Other means here encompassing the sole use of coercion or the symbiotic use of coercion and persuasion. . . . [M]ethodologically, terrorism can be . . . the use of coercion and persuasion simultaneously, but as a definable, distinguishable phenomenon, terrorism is never purely persuasive in character—the realm of a bona fide political or religious group.”⁹
Perhaps the most important characteristic of terrorism is the great psychological impact it (deliberately) has upon the people it targets. There is usually nothing personal between the terrorist and the victim. Quite the contrary, terrorists opt for random attacks against innocent noncombatants and civilians so as to intimidate or horrify a distant audience, thus setting a dramatic example. In fact, the more irrelevant the victims to the terrorist’s demands the more horrific the effect and the more coercive the act: “For ordinary citizens are killed and no defense is offered—none could be offered—in terms of their individual actions. The names and occupations of the dead are not known in advance; they are killed simply to deliver a message of fear to others like themselves.”10 It is provocation, propaganda and symbolism that underlie terrorist action, since terrorists “choose targets not for their military value, but for their ability to create an extreme reaction . . . and their utility in prodding others to act. Many terrorists have hoped their feats would lure their enemy into self-destructive behavior.”11 When Al-Qaeda perpetrated the 9/11 atrocities, what it undoubtedly achieved was oblige the United States to strike back with much more fierceness and determination—with the “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq. That was a necessary evil, or probably the desired effect for the terrorists whose ultimate goal was the unification of all Muslims under one cause: victory over the aggressive West. The 9/11 attacks had allegedly proved that Western Power is not invincible, an idea that attracted new supporters of the Al-Qaeda’s “cause.”

**The end of History, the Clash of Civilizations and the question of the Real: Historico-Political Peregrinations**

In the summer 1989 issue of the *National Interest* journal there appeared a groundbreaking article—later made into a book—by Francis Fukuyama entitled “The End of History?” Therein, Fukuyama made the point that History as we knew it had drawn to its close with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Communism by Liberal Democracy and the Free Market Economy. We had finally reached the ultimate form of human government as Western Democracy was allegedly the best form of government we could attain:
[A] remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism. . . . Liberal democracy may constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government” [thus leading to] “the end of history.” That is, while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions. . . . While some present-day countries might fail to achieve stable liberal democracy, and others might lapse back into other, more primitive forms of rule like theocracy or military dictatorship, the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on.12

Fukuyama’s main fallacy lies in conceiving of history mainly as the struggle between liberal democracy and other lesser systems of government—between good and evil, so to speak. Through the framework of a Hegelian and teleological trajectory of History, democracy, as it is currently implemented, manages to win out over all the other “defective” systems for good, thus inaugurating itself as humanity’s final ideological transformation. In Fukuyama’s opinion, the end of the strife marked the end of History as a coherent, evolutionary process and possibly the beginning of a new era of capitalist prosperity and well-being for the countries and nations that would fully espouse the ideal new kind of government. This is an undoubtedly “beautiful” narrative in its linearity and optimism which, though, fails not only on account of its absolute trust in liberal democracy and capitalism but also its insistence that capitalist democracy represents the ideal which cannot possibly be surpassed. The problem is that the philosophical stasis implicit in the narrative of liberal democratic “perfection” entails not only the end of history but also the death of man as an agent of constant change, and this is where real terror begins. Isn’t it terrifying to imagine that we have reached the end of the line and that no improvement is possible in the future? Moreover, don’t those that argue against the legitimacy or plausibility of an alternative political system function like terrorists, insofar as they are terrorizing us into an enthusiastic acceptance of the West’s dominant system at the expense of (potentially healthier) future options? This kind of terrorism comprises the threat that
unless we endorse the new reality, we risk lapsing into older, more hegemonic and tyrannical regimes. As has been appositively stated,

the real terror is the threat that system change is no longer possible—the threat that there is no way out of this capitalist thing. . . . The fact is, we don’t know . . . whether or not a system change to something better than capitalism is possible. But this . . . insistence that it isn’t . . . may be the most threatening terror of all, a paralyzing terror that robs us at once of history and a future. . . . This is indeed the terrifying, sublime, spectacular message continuously repeated by the voice of power as such today.13

Could a resistance to such a terrible or sublime upshot be embodied in the phenomenon of terrorism as it re-emerged as an urgent issue after the Cold War? In short, could terrorism be seen as an answer to the grand narrative of the end of History?

Samuel Huntington, Fukuyama’s mentor, responded almost immediately to his disciple’s claim concerning History’s “end” by coming up with the idea of a future international clash that would not occur on an ideological and economic level but on a cultural and civilizational one. In his article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?”, Huntington dismisses the idea that History has completed its course and makes the point that in the twenty-first century a major source of conflict will be “the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values.” One such response might be “to attempt to ‘balance’ the West by . . . cooperating with other non-Western societies against the West. . . .” In other words, they might attempt “to modernize but not to Westernize.”14 A war between religions or between cultures is in the offing, according to Huntington, because the various entities are bound to become civilization-conscious. Despite his nearly totalizing attitude towards global conflict—by fantasizing about an extreme polarization between West and non-West in the future, the former representing an inside that is good and safe and the latter reflecting an outside, a fundamentalist Islam, associated with evil and insecurity—Huntington does allude to the future reinvigoration or radicalization of religious groups around the globe and especially in the Middle East, which has largely conduced to the creation of Islamist and Jihadist terrorism at the end of the twentieth century; still, he hasn’t put his finger on it and that could be logical because who could have predicted with accuracy that terrorism would have risen to such massive, and almost epidemic, proportions at the turn of the twenty-first century, with September 11, naturally,
standing out as the epitome of ultra-modern, unprecedented terrorism? Nonetheless, 9/11 might, indeed, exemplify what Huntington meant when he said that there would emerge (at least an appearance of) a non-Western alliance against the Christian West, in the context of which non-Western states or separate entities within them would become modern—in terms of technological sophistication, methodology, international cooperation, education—but not Western—they would refuse to subscribe to the values of Liberal democracy, human rights, Capitalism and the Western conception of “freedom.”

There remains a profound skepticism, however, with regard to the clash of civilizations, considering the possibility that “what we are witnessing today are . . . clashes within each civilization,” because are not “all real-life ‘clashes’ clearly related to global capitalism? The Muslim ‘fundamentalist’ target is not only global capitalism’s corrosive impact on social life, but also the corrupt ‘traditionalist’ regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and so on.”

Even in such seminal and insightful political analyses as Fukuyama’s and Huntington’s, terrorism manages to elude definition, rationalization, or even representation. If, as I have stated above, terrorism has lately reached epidemic proportions, this is, amongst other reasons, symptomatic of its virus-like status. Jean Baudrillard states that terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent. . . . It is at the very heart of this culture which combats it, and the visible fracture (and the hatred) that pits the exploited and the underdeveloped globally against the Western world secretly connects with the fracture internal to the dominant system. That system can face down any visible antagonism. But against the other kind . . . the system can do nothing.

A virus cannot exist on its own. It needs a body in order to start “operating.” As soon as it has infiltrated the body, the latter begins to crumble on its own. Baudrillard thinks that a terrorist organization of Al-Qaeda’s caliber is that invisible virus that enters the body—the West, Liberal Democracy, global Capitalism—and dismantles it from within. The terrorist virus cannot survive outside the organism (the Capitalistic West); in fact, it thrives on it. As a result, if the “body” is gone, so will the terrorist virus. Baudrillard’s point is that terrorism cannot engage openly in a full-blown war against an official or recognizable entity or organism like a state, a nation, or an entire
civilization but can only strike surreptitiously where the recognizable entity seems loose at its seams. This is the reason why he is skeptical of Huntington’s notion of a “clash of civilizations” in the form of an open conflict between clearly visible and recognizable opponents. Moreover, for him, contrary to Huntington’s as well as other political analysts’ views, the problem of Islamist terrorism against the West extends well beyond both Islam and America: “This is not, then, a clash of civilizations or religions. . . . There is, indeed, a fundamental antagonism here, but one which points . . . to triumphant globalization battling against itself. . . . A fractal war of all cells, all singularities, revolting in the form of anti-bodies. . . . [If] Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam.”\textsuperscript{18} In this light, if the forces of Good (globalization) ceased to be good (by abstaining from the commonly accepted practice of globalization), then evil (acts of terrorism) would also cease to exist. Baudrillard’s philosophical tendencies, therefore, lead him to take a plunge into the ontological and moral aspects of terrorism. Intriguingly, in his mind revolves the image of terrorism as an immoral but strangely “healthy” power (an “anti-body”) that strikes at the heart of globalization which, though, is just as immoral. So, there seems to be a higher ethics in the conflict at hand; an ethics that rises above conventional human morality.

If Fukuyama called attention to the end of history after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Baudrillard, a decade later, brought up the issue of the “un-eventfulness” of history from 1989 to 2001, of some sort of strike of events before the defining moment of 9/11 which supposedly terminated that strike and made history continue its trajectory. The unprecedented attack on Western (American) territory constituted for him the “mother” of all events and a compensation for all the events that had never taken place up until then. The elevation of the terrorist atrocity to a “motherly” status and the suggestion that it is a watershed event covertly aestheticize it by ascribing to it a symbolic power and a spectacularity that deprive it of its real dimension as well as its historical significance. On the other hand, it is precisely its “unreal” (that is, aesthetic) and symbolic dimension that is responsible for the abrupt resumption of history: hence, the already trivialized but somehow truthful metaphorical assertion that neither the world nor people’s visions or representations of terrorism “will ever be the same again.” Before a terrible as well as incomprehensible event—before, that is, a “sublime” instance of terror—we inevitably remain speechless, and it is that speechlessness that will define us from now on.
By contrast to Baudrillard’s ambivalent ethics of the terrorist aesthetic, other philosophers discerned in recent terrorist activity the possibility of a vengeful return of the absolutely Real itself. Slavoj Zizek contends that an ethical appreciation of massive and spectacular terrorism presupposes the construal of terrorist horror as something that is utterly real, despite its symbolic and aesthetic dimension that is reinforced by media coverage. What he calls for is an ethical appreciation of terrorism which would not let the aesthetic take over from a responsible reflection upon the brutality of a terrorist act involving real bleeding people and real pain. As he quickly adds, however, in the late-twentieth century postmodern world of virtual reality and simulation, the real is ironically disguised or presented as fiction through precisely its spectacularization: “The authentic twentieth-century passion for penetrating the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) . . . thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate ‘effect’. . . .”\(^{19}\); furthermore, that passion is a fake one insofar as it constitutes “*the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*. . . .”\(^{20}\) Simply put, Zizek believes that the more we strive towards the palpably real, the more we are likely to encounter fictional representations of it. This is the postmodern take on mediated experience pertaining to the twentieth century.

Since 9/11 was staged as a media spectacle, in the sense that the terrorists put into practical use the power and influence of the terrible (TV) image, for Zizek it does not constitute a newness, as Baudrillard argues, but an exaggerated version of older forms of terrorism. This piece of information is not necessarily important, one might retort. On the contrary, the appraisal of the terrorist deed in terms of its novelty or not is very important because it helps us adopt an ethical attitude towards that infinitely unjust form of self-righteous “punishment.” More specifically, contrary to what we think or openly declare, an innovative terrorist hit draws much more of our attention and renders us more sensitive to the seriousness of the problem of extreme violence than a strike of terrorism that follows the beaten track, in which case we usually shrug off the problem (which ends up not being a problem at all) by looking away in apathy or indifference. But how can you look away from unthinkable violence in the case of the Islamic State? This terrorist organization might be said to represent what twenty-first-century terrorism will probably look like: a terrible and gory visuality which constitutes the utter reality of this century. The terrorist activity of ISIS represents a new barbaric politics of non-negotiation which capitalizes on the aesthetics of goriness and the new “real.”
Attending to the aesthetic/philosophical connotations of terrorism and at the same time investigating it against the backdrop of the various historico-political cycles it passed through are integral parts of this study. After all, questions of representation, language, and style are deeply embedded into the politics and history of terrorism.

**Revolutionary Art, Theory, and Literature as Violence**

In his 1909 Futurist manifesto, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti claimed unabashedly that art “can only be violence, cruelty, and injustice.” Faithful to the dogma that art should not be related to the human, the normative, or even the humane, Marinetti saw in Futurism an opportunity to redefine art as “the destruction of commonality through violence.” One, of course, need not subscribe to Futurism’s fascist claims as to the creation of a new kind of Man who will be completely automatized and devoid of human sentimentality, but it does not follow that Marinetti’s idea that art is necessarily violent and cruel should not be considered as a plausible one. If art can only be “violence” and “injustice,” and allowing for the fact that terrorism is violent and unjust, does that mean that terrorism can be viewed along artistic lines? And conversely, if, in accordance with futurism, the “commonality” of man needs to be dissolved and supposing that art does constitute a platform for “destroying” this commonality, does it follow that art, as a radical form of expression, necessarily makes terrorist claims, that is, it aspires to terrorize us out of our apathy? If so, the line between artistic sensibility and terrorism is extremely thin, a realization that naturally poses issues of moral nature.

In his “Theatre of Cruelty,” Antonin Artaud explored the affinity between art and terror when he tried to erase the distance between his audience and theatrical representation, thereby affecting physically the spectators by bringing them into the center of the action and providing them with the “real thing.” Back in the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke had already conceived of the idea that art proceeds in a manner analogous to terror, while twentieth-century, and particularly inter-war avant-garde artists maintained that art needed to radicalize itself if it was to be progressive, authentic, original, and groundbreaking. Surrealism’s violent denunciation of colonial
and Western discourse has been seen as verging on insurgency and terrorism, especially as far as its call for the destruction of European materialism in favor of a more “Oriental” mentality is concerned. Such a call amounted to a real “insurrection within thought” that would subvert the fundamental humanist values and frameworks of the West.24

Literature has repeatedly alluded to the interrelatedness between the artist and the terrorist, at times going beyond the exploration of their mere symbolic connection. Don de Lillo’s fiction, to take one example, frequently demonstrates the realization that creating radical, transgressive art and committing violent deeds may be dangerously similar to each other. Bakunin had famously stated that the passion for destruction is a passion which is creative, while Andre Breton cut right to the chase: “The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamt of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinisation has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.”25 Alternatively, as Breton declared in his manifesto for true art which he wrote with Leon Trotsky, “true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society.”26

There seems to be more than a symbolic affinity between art and terrorism. “Imagination” seems to be the element that is found in both. On the one hand, terrorism needs to be imaginative to be successful, and on the other, radical art and imagination must be able not to just appeal to our sensibilities but also create awe, fear or even terror in us without, however, truly jeopardizing our safety. That is not such a far cry from considering authentic art to be inextricable from the feeling of the sublime, or looking to the very image of the terrorist act for realizing the idea of a terrible sublimity in real life. The sublime is part and parcel of the aesthetic. This book will, amongst other things, grapple with aesthetic sublimity as elaborated by Burke and Kant, but it cannot afford not to read the sublime also, and especially, through the postwar conceptualizations of it—by such major theorists of the twentieth century as Lyotard or Derrida, for instance—as an intrinsically political notion laden with all the negative connotations born of the memories of the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated during the two World Wars. Terrorism is not war, at least not a conventional one, but the concept of sublimity is equally applicable to it, if not more, since a terrorist attack involves surprise and a feeling of utter helplessness and terror.
before an ostensibly incomprehensible act of extreme (political) violence. If the eighteenth-century understanding of the sublime carried some undertones of positivity and, in Kant’s case, even optimism, the twentieth- and twenty-first-century one left no such margin for positive appreciation but opened itself to an abyss of negativity: the sublime is now a “negative” one. Along similar lines, we might argue that, on a moral level, terrorism represents the negative sublime insofar as it does not only defy representation and logic but also, through its rawness and cruelty, calls into question the very notion of the “human.” Because terrorist acts “elude meaningful quantitative determination, we must further acknowledge their moral and aesthetic incommensurability, indeed, their very inconceivability” or their negative sublimity.27 Terrorism—bearing at its core the element of “terror” as an overwhelming feeling of intense fear and anxiety—could be viewed as some sort of postmodern war which, through its unexpectedness, elusiveness and inexplicability, renders, momentarily, the unpresentable visible.
Notes

7. Igor Primoratz, Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 24. In his definition, Primoratz does not stress that the violence inflicted during a terrorist act has to be political, or at least, disguised as such, otherwise it lapses into mere criminal action.
15. As is already known, the Nigerian Boko Haram has sworn allegiance to ISIS from Syria and Iraq, whereas Al-Shabaab, based in Somalia, had placed itself under the wings of Al-Qaeda back in 2012. What better evidence is there for the claim that what is at stake is a sophisticated and completely modernized international cooperation among terrorist groups based in many different non-Western states? Of course, Huntington was mainly talking about entire states as willing to enter an anti-Western alliance, which is far from what really happened in the meantime.

18. Ibid., pp. 11-2.
20. Ibid., p. 29.
Bibliography


CHAPTER 1

Historical Faces of Terrorism
1.1 Ancient avatars of Terror

Terrorism, which has usually been associated with revolutionary, anti-state violence, is a rather modern term. Nonetheless, early forms of it can be traced back to ancient times. If, for example, tyrannicide—the assassination of a tyrant—can be seen as a case of revolutionary violence inflicted upon an unjust and unethical political regime (or corrupt king), the notorious case of the murder of Hipparchus, brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, might fit the pattern. In 514 BC Hipparchus was assassinated by Harmodius and Aristogeiton who, after Hippias was finally overthrown, were extolled by the Athenian crowds as their true liberators from tyranny. In fact, a monument to the two assassins was erected in the ancient Agora of the city—purportedly the first monument in Ancient Greece to honor humans rather than gods.\(^1\) Of course, one of the most famous cases of tyrannicide in history was the assassination of Julius Caesar, an act which was just as famously defended by Plutarch and Cicero.\(^2\) The people that conspired against him, members of the Senate who called themselves “The Liberators,” were abhorred at his appointment as “dictator for life” as well as his demagogic tendencies. Thus, his assassination—“execution” might have been named by terrorists today—was retrospectively presented as a duty to the people of Rome. For Cicero, to kill a man is atrocious but to kill a tyrant—a title that had already taken on very negative connotations—was noble, therefore morally justifiable: “[I]f anyone kills a tyrant . . . he has not laden his soul with guilt, has he? The Roman People, at all events, are not of that opinion; for of all glorious deeds they hold such a one to be the most noble.”\(^3\)

Despite the determination and cynicism of the aforementioned conspiratorial acts—the killing of Hipparchus and the assassination of Julius Caesar—we cannot say that they fall easily within the strict category of “terrorism,” whose basic constituent as a term is “terror” that is felt not so much by those directly implicated—the actual victims—as by onlookers, bystanders, fellow-citizens, etc., who are the real targets. One of the well-known instances of terrorist violence as we mean it today, as activity that needs to be witnessed to have an impact at all and one that is full of symbolism and provocation—all those elements creating a cumulative aesthetic of terror—was the terrorism unleashed by the Sicarri in Judea against Roman sympathizers. The Sicarri (“dagger-men” in Latin) first emerged approximately twenty years before the
destruction of Jerusalem by Roman emperor Titus in 70 AD, and spread terror among Jews who were suspected of being in close cooperation with Rome. They did not target Romans directly but their fellow citizens, so that both would get the message.

One might safely argue that the Sicarri approximated the modern conception of terrorism for the additional reason that their methodology rings familiar to a modern-day thinker of terrorism: if Julius Caesar was treacherously dragged to the Senate to be given the fatal blow by Marcus Brutus, the Sicarri carried out assassinations in public areas and in broad daylight so that they could easily get away with it by blending with the bustling crowds. Therefore, if Caesar was reputed dead through rumor and hearsay, a Sicarri killing was immediately attested to by the public which would naturally be horrified by the atrocious deed, intimidated, and eventually deterred from acting in a way that was not in the pure interest of the terrorist group. In essence, eye-witnessing was crucial for the success of the deed. Another point of contiguity between terrorism as an aesthetic/symbolic act and Sicarri terrorism is terrorism’s propagandist nature. More particularly, the Sicarri group, just like Islamist terrorism today, resorted to terrifying deeds in order to inculcate the seed of insurrection in the hearts of others who would thus be coerced into fighting with the terrorists against the status quo. In other words, the group intended to reinvigorate the spirit of resistance by perpetrating acts that could be imitated by other people. At any rate, their dramatic acts of public violence might be said to have anticipated today’s TV networks and their capacity to proliferate images of horror, thus exerting immense psychological influence upon people that are by no means directly involved in the act of terrorism perpetrated.4

More than a thousand and a half years later, the hope of provoking a popular revolution via a reinvigoration of the spirit of Catholicism prompted Guy Fawkes, alongside twelve other conspirators, to plot against King James I of England and blow up the House of Parliament by detonating the thirty-six barrels of gunpowder that had been stored beneath it.5 The Gunpowder Plot of November 5, 1605, which failed because Fawkes was discovered the night before, epitomizes terrorist violence in an obviously modern sense, namely as an unprecedented and impressive strike aspiring to shock as well as win over potential admirers and supporters of a common (Catholic) cause. The plotters used technology—huge quantities of gunpowder—in a “novel” way, in order to provoke a spectacularly massive explosion with a high death toll. The strike differed from previous ones in its non-fastidiousness: this time,
collateral deaths were not out of the question since the idea was to inflict symbolic as well literal (material) violence upon an entire institution rather than merely a person—even if that person was the King himself. There was nothing *strictly* personal against the members of the Parliament. Actually, there were many Catholics in it whose lives would be gladly spared, such as William Parker, 4th Baron Monteagle, who was the one to receive an anonymous letter stating that he should stay away from the building in the next few days as something horrible was about to happen. The letter was sent by one of the conscience-stricken conspirators who felt pretty nervous about the possibility of harming Catholics. But that was precisely the cause of the plotters’ downfall; the letter gave away their secret scheme and led to their execution.

If there is a moral in this story, it has to be about how utterly devoid of sentimentality and morality a terrorist act must be in order to attain its goals.\(^6\) If one of the plotters had not “gone soft,” so to speak, their plans would not have fallen through. It could be said that, on the one hand, the Gunpowder Plot took anti-state (proto)terrorism to a wholly new level due to its (initial) nonfastidiousness (the possibility of collateral casualties being an acceptable one) as well as its potentiality for massive destruction\(^7\); but on the other, this enhanced new version of terror quickly reverted to an older form of “conscientious” proto-terrorist mentality born of the unwritten ethical law of refraining from harming the “innocent.”

In the history of revolutionary violence in Western Europe, the English Civil War of the 1640s looms large as the event that legitimated tyrannicide and probably paved the way for the French Revolution a century and a half later. The conflict between Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, and Anglicans who adhered to royalty caused the overthrow of King Charles I and his public execution in 1649 for being “a tyrant, a traitor, and murderer, and a public enemy of the Commonwealth of England.”\(^8\) What was new about Charles’ execution was not the execution itself; many leaders and kings had been killed in cold blood. It was the public and ritualistic character of the execution as well as the fact that the king was tried and subsequently executed by his own subjects that presented a novel development in the course of politically and religiously-motivated violence. The spectacular dimension of the decapitation (the rendering, that is, of the decapitation into a spectacle) constituted an aestheticizing of death which, paradoxically, reinforced the legitimacy of murder committed by the new revolutionary government. In addition, it helped consolidate a culture and practice of terror throughout Cromwell’s reign that merely replaced the
former terror, that of the king’s, which shows that revolution is a two-edged sword. Albert Parry comments upon how easily revolutionary violence may slip into sheer terrorism unleashed, with the best of intentions, by the new state:

Such terror is double-edged. It is the terror used to achieve the overthrow of the existing government. It is also the terror employed when these very same terrorists, having tasted victory and seized the state, wield their newfound power to victimize their opponents, both real and imagined. In both categories, the weapons are intimidation, systematic violence, continual bloodshed. The aim of the game is “revolution.” Its slogan: “In the name of humanity and justice.” And while the method of these terrorists of both categories appears to be revolutionary, the substance of their activities is reactionary.⁹

Terrorism, admittedly, did not begin as anti-state but rather as state terrorism. Cromwell’s reign could be seen as a precursor of the state terrorism imposed by the Jacobins after the French Revolution of 1789. It is important to keep in mind that modern terrorism itself acquired its contemporary characteristics from the reign of terror enforced from the fall of 1793 to the summer of 1794. Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins, is thought to be the father of terrorist thinking in his conceptualization of Terror as a kind of virtue that protects the citizens from the disorder and chaos wreaked by so-called “enemies” of the state. Robespierre, in the following excerpt from his Report upon the Principles of Political Morality Which Are to Form the Basis of the Administration of the Interior Concerns of the Republic, condenses in a few lines his philosophy as well as his conception of the ethics of political violence:

Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all tyranny’s friends conspire; they will conspire until hope is wrested from crime. We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of our policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people’s enemies by terror. If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it
is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country’s most urgent needs.\textsuperscript{10}  
If we put Robespierre’s words in the context of pre-revolutionary France, we will discover that much of what he says makes sense. Before 1789, France had no political parties and its people had very few rights. When the revolution erupted, King Louis XVI of France was the absolute sovereign. Around him revolved the privileged class of the nobility which hardly paid any taxes and wanted to ensure that things would basically remain the same in the political scene of the country. From 1789 to 1792 the new National Assembly destroyed the Old Order, abolished the authorities of the king and declared that the people were to become the only source of power. Soon France would be a republic. However, the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, a journalist and an adherent to the Revolution and the Jacobins, led Robespierre’s rule down bloodier paths by converting a revolutionary state supporting the freedom of the people from monarchical repression into a ruthless dictatorship which would suppress people’s rights even more than the regime it replaced. The suspicion that the aristocracy, with the help of other counter-revolutionary forces from other countries, contemplated the overthrow of the republic turned what was the “Great Fear”—the raw violence exerted on the elite by the peasants who burned down premises and houses of the aristocracy and smashed records—into the Great Terror (la Grande Terreur), vestiges of which we may discern in the excerpt from Robespierre’s address.

During the Great Terror or Reign of Terror, which, we should not forget, was established in the name of the people of the republic as a way to protect the revolution against its enemies, approximately 32,000 people fell victim to the new regime’s tactics and were executed as potentially conspiring against the Revolution. For Robespierre, “virtue was the mainspring of a popular government at peace, but that during the time of revolution virtue must be allied with terror in order for democracy to triumph.”\textsuperscript{11} For the Jacobins the system of terror “had a thoroughly positive meaning, as did the word that they occasionally used to describe themselves: \textit{les terroristes}. What Robespierre described was a dictatorship of the majority, with the minority left naked and unprotected. . . . Virtue was defined as self-abnegation, a devotion to civic duty. . . . And although virtue sprang from the people, it transcended them. . . .”\textsuperscript{12} This is very often the case with terrorism. It, unknowingly or not, transcends its very own cause. In fact, one of the problems with terror is that it often “leads to more terror, because it coarsens political dialogue and destroys traditional
1.2 State terrorism, the sublime, and the propaganda of the deed

The French Revolution did not only lay the groundwork for terrorism as we know it today, but it also set the philosophical and political parameters of the *sublime*, a notion which had re-emerged in eighteenth-century aesthetics mostly through the work of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The aesthetic category of the sublime was associated, in both thinkers, with the subjective feeling of terror before an event of absolute forcefulness. For Burke, the sheer fact of regicide constituted such an act of terrible sublimity. In fact, Burke is credited with the very translation of the French word *terroriste* into English when, in a letter to Earl Fitzwilliam in 1795, he cried out against the revolutionaries by calling them hell hounds and terrorists. The sublime as paralyzing terror before an instance of extreme, asymmetric violence is one of the key terms of this study insofar it introduces terrorism and, its constituent element, terror, as intrinsically aesthetic rather than simply political terms as far as their impact upon the subject is concerned. Simultaneously, sublimity in terrorism will be conceptualized as a glimpse of the . . . “inconceivable” itself, in terms of the incomprehensibility, unexpectedness but also terrible immediacy of the terrorist strike. In this light, (sublime) terrorism is not far from Lyotard’s notion of the unpresentable as something which cannot be fully (re)presented cognitively and rationally.

For Kant, the sublime is precisely the heterogeneity between image and concept or, rather, the impossibility of finding examples from the imagination that can do justice to a concept. At issue, here, is not sublimity as aesthetic sensibility per se, but as distanced aesthetic reaction provoked at the sight of a certain terrible *image*. Both Kant and Burke presume that the sublime is not an objective quality inhering in an object but a subjective feeling before (the image of) that object. More intriguingly,
they assume that there is necessarily some distance between the one who experiences that feeling and the object under appreciation, otherwise there can be no “sublimity” involved. That intervening distance is aesthetic, in the sense that it places the terrifying object under aesthetic scrutiny while locating the image of terror in the realm of aesthetic experience. Terrorism, that is, will be seen as a terrible image as well as praxis that thrives on aesthetics and subjective experience by relying upon spectators’ aesthetic sensibility to promote its terrible ethics.

Of aesthetic and philosophical nature are many of the theoretical justifications of terrorist violence by anarchist (that is, anti-state) individuals and groups. In an 1849 manifesto entitled “Murder,” Prussian anarchist and writer Karl Heinzen endorsed the view that assassination and political violence were the things that made the world . . . go around and history progress:

We must call a spade a spade. The truth must out, whether it seems amiable or terrible, whether it is dressed in the white of peace or the red of war. Let us then be frank and honest, let us tear away the veil and spell out in plain speech what the lesson is which is now being illustrated every day before our eyes in the form of actions and threats, blood and torture, cannons and gallows by both princes and freedom-fighters. . . ; to wit, that murder is the principal agent of historical progress.14

Heinzen justifies violence and murder on the basis of their historical “necessity.” The underlying assumption is that historical progress can only be effected through the exertion of raw power by both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary agencies. Killing, for him, is never moral, “but in practice it is frequently depicted otherwise. . . . Because states . . . had thus shown the concepts of morality and justice to be relative, governments could not legitimately reference those standards when violently oppressing their opponents.” Why should violence “be denied to freedom-fighters, the true moral forces of their age?”15

If “murder” is the only existing truth, then apparently we must accept it as a natural law of life and flaunt it as the guiding principle behind people’s actions. In the name of “frankness” and of a transcendental version of truth, Heinzen unveils his vision of humanity not in terms of a Hobbesian distinction between evil and good but in terms of a philosophical investigation of humanity’s supposedly natural urge to act or become extinct. Noticeably, figurativeness and tropes—“let us tear away the veil”—perform a decisive role in the rhetoric of the anarchist who calls for bloody
action, as if real, literal violence needed the fictional guise of literariness and metaphor to establish itself as historical necessity. In advancing terrorism, Heinzen also anticipated the leading role of technology in conventional and nonconventional warfare in the future and more importantly, justified genocidal violence on a massive scale such as totalitarian and fascist terror.¹⁶

Picking up where Heinzen had left off, Sergei Nechaev, a Russian Revolutionary, wrote The Catechism of the Revolutionist when he was in exile in Switzerland together with Michael Bakunin. The Catechism is a pamphlet on ways of setting up secret societies which would dedicate themselves to merciless destruction. Those societies would have no ethical restraints since the very state that they opposed was not bound by any rules of morality either. Nechaev believed that subscribers to the revolutionary cause should be completely cut off from friends, families and their social circles, thus devoting themselves to the success of their activities. In his pamphlet we may discern an early conceptualization of what we today call “collateral casualties” or even the latency of the “nobody’s innocent” postmodern credo, insofar as he seemed to think that whereas the revolution would take place in ordinary (poor) people’s name, the latter were disposable to the extent that they allegedly could not live up to the expectations of a real revolution by working alongside revolutionists against the oppressiveness of the state. As Nechaev famously wrote, the revolutionary “is a doomed man,” by which he meant that either he will be lost for the sake of the revolution or made unnecessary by the ideal circumstances in a post-revolutionary Russia. Dostoevsky used the figure of Nechaev and his ideas in his novel called The Devils (alternatively translated as The Possessed) published in 1872.

One of the most influential concepts in the history of revolutionary terrorism is the so-called “propaganda by the deed,” that was first used by Carlo Pisacane, an Italian anarchist who believed that spontaneous insurrection was in the veins of the downtrodden who just needed to be inspired by a sensational hit perpetrated by those already immersed in the culture of revolution. He wrote the following:

Propaganda of the idea is a chimera. The education of the people is an absurdity. Ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former. . . . The only work a citizen can do for the good of the country is that of cooperating with the material revolution: therefore, conspiracies, plots, attempts, etc., are that series of deeds through which Italy proceeds toward her goal.¹⁷
Pisacane thought that the lower social classes did not have time to read pamphlets and manifestos about a potential revolution—the drudgery of reality was enough for them. So they needed to act rather than read. Theory could not lead to practice, while education was not a prerequisite of action; on the contrary, violent action preceded (the need for) theoretical education. Indeed, violence was educative due to its didactic aspects: “Violence was necessary not only to draw attention to, or generate publicity for, a cause, but also to inform, educate, and ultimately rally the masses behind the revolution. The didactic purpose of violence . . . could never be effectively replaced by pamphlets, wall posters, or assemblies.”18 People would not be educated till they were free, and education did not precede freedom. In other words, physical violence was, by itself, a political language that could be spoken and understood, or even a rhetorical tool which could be employed as a means of negotiation between the interested parties.

The first terrorist group to implement Pisacane’s words concerning deeds as forms of propaganda was the Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will) established in 1878 with the intention of opposing the rule of the czar. This terrorist organization did not resort to indiscriminate spectacular killings but rather targeted specific individuals for their symbolic value as representatives of the tyrannical czarist regime. Interestingly, the Narodnaya Volya adhered to an ethical code according to which no innocent blood should be spilled, so any subversive activity that jeopardized the lives of people that were irrelevant to the group’s target was quickly aborted. After eight failed attempts, the Narodnaya Volya finally succeeded in assassinating Czar Alexander II on 1 March 1881. Most of the conspirators were soon captured, which spelled the end of the organization. However, the news of the assassination spread across Europe and encouraged would-be revolutionaries to engage in analogous activities against tyrannical rule on the continent. That was an impressive re-enactment of the “Propaganda by the deed” credo: the death of Alexander was the deed that propagated the subversive ideologies and philosophies which would later underpin future terrorist acts. In simple terms, the deed had spoken in an educative language that everyone could sense and now it befell the theorizing pamphlets and speeches to explain what exactly the deed itself had said.

A few months after the assassination, an anarchist conference entitled “Anarchist International” was held in London, the main purpose of which was to openly declare its allegiance to revolutionary tactics and anti-state activity. The Narodnaya Volya
had unknowingly accomplished its mission. The very concept of a massive terrorist wave potentially working undercover ignited unfamiliar emotions, such as fear, that ironically promoted further the goals of various subversive organizations whose power depended largely upon rumor and propaganda while feeding off the public’s deepest nightmares. As is evident, a terrorist act is hardly meaningful unless it is communicated, made known to the general public that constitutes an “audience” which is called upon to appreciate, ethically as well aesthetically, the act of terror at hand.

The “propaganda by the deed” dogma was readily adopted by theorists of anarchy and proto-terrorism such as Johann Most, Morozov and Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin elaborated upon the powerfulness of this dogma by arguing that “actions which compel general attention . . . in a few days make more propaganda than thousands of pamphlets.” In 1880, Morozov insisted that success “of the terroristic movement will be inevitable if the future terroristic struggle will become a deed of not only one separate group, but an idea, which cannot be destroyed by people.” The idea, that is, which is inspired by the terrible deed, will become immune to people’s manipulative tendencies. Johann Most, on the other hand, emphasized, consciously or not, the manipulative aspects of calling for revolutionary action when, in 1884, he wrote the following in his anarchist newspaper Freiheit: “We provoke; we stroke the fire of revolution and incite people to revolt in any way we can. The people have always been ‘ready’ for freedom; they have simply lacked the courage to claim it for themselves.” A year later, he provided a more detailed exegesis of what he thought of anarchist methodology:

The great thing about anarchist vengeance is that it proclaims loud and clear for everyone to hear, that: this man or that man must die for this and this reason. . . . Once such action has been carried out, the important thing is that the world learns of it from the revolutionaries, so that everyone knows what the position is. . . . [I]mmEDIATELY after the action has been carried out, especially in the town where it took place, posters should be put up setting out the reasons for the action in such a way as to draw from them the best possible benefit.

In this passage it is made clear that anarchist (terrorist) groups prioritize terrorizing deeds—for instance, assassinations—over a priori theoretical explications of a future political murder because they cut right through the society’s heart and appeal to
people’s senses rather than their power of reasoning. There is no message involved other than the shocking act that “proclaims loud and clear for everyone to hear” its own righteousness. By being “loud,” those deeds exhibit their superiority to mere words which are “empty” and “silent” and therefore undermine the political urgency of anti-state violence. More significantly though, the act has to be retrospectively advertised and brought to the attention of the public as a political statement that needed to be made loud and clear. The efficacy of such a statement hinges upon its immediacy, sheer physicality as well as fundamental irrationality, all of which make sure that the act will inevitably be imprinted in the memory of ordinary people and thus become a potential factor of change in the future.

Colonialism and the struggle against it were equally important platforms for disseminating the “culture” of terrorism. Before the withdrawal of the British from India in 1947 after a massive nonviolent opposition to the colonial authorities—through peaceful disobedience, mostly—there had emerged voices calling for armed resistance to the oppressor as the only means of liberation. In the late 1920s an Indian terrorist, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, member of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), publicized his manifesto entitled The Philosophy of Bomb in which he opposed Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent, anti-terrorist, tactics as utopian and futile:

[Terrorism] instills fear in the hearts of the oppressors, it brings hope of revenge and redemption to the oppressed masses. It gives courage and self confidence to the wavering, it shatters the spell of the subject race in the eyes of the world, because it is the most convincing proof of a nation’s hunger for freedom. . . . There is not a crime that Britain has not committed in India. Deliberate misrule has reduced us to paupers, has bled us white. As a race and as a people we stand dishonored and outraged. . . . We shall have our revenge, a people’s righteous revenge on the tyrant.23 

As a contradiction in terms, the “bomb’s” “philosophy” (how can we talk of bombs and philosophy in a single breath?) is to blow away the underlying “rhetoric” of continuous exploitation (of the colonized) through the exertion of sudden and extreme violence upon the ruling power’s representatives. The “philosophy” of terrorism, as implied by Vohra, consists in the subjects’ awakening to the actual, the “real” reality encompassing them. The “hunger for freedom” mentioned is, in a sense, the hunger for removing the veil of deception and imagined reality—by “shattering the spell”—
or the strong desire to resist passivity and meaninglessness through engaging in real, tangible, action that not only liberates a race or nation literally from the yoke of a colonial tyrant but also helps it to reconnect with real, *authentic* living.

Besides, therefore, from the purely political and pragmatic aspect of national independence and freedom, there is the question of the aesthetic dimension of the individual will to propose physical action against theoretical insurgence and sterile philosophizing. The aesthetics of this kind of political action is rooted in a deep-seated truth connected with the supposedly lower-class status of the terrorist: “[W]hile terrorists have always claimed to kill on behalf of the oppressed, they have almost always come from the well-educated, middle-class families. Members of the oppressed classes, on the other hand, are usually the ones who turn them in to the authorities.” It is very frequently true that those that speak and act in the name of the poor are members of the elite, who, disaffected by the complacency and apathy of their own class, decide to throw themselves into ostensibly meaningful action in order to regain their long-lost sense of the real—“real” as the *reality* of violence. When Alain Badiou touched upon the twentieth century’s fascination with the authentic, it was the legitimating force of violence and destruction that he had in mind: “There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes. It is a passion for the authentic [that] can only be fulfilled as destruction. . . . The passion for the real is always the passion for the new—but what is the new?” If the passion for the authentic is the passion for the authentically violent and the new, then the desire to witness or experience palpable reality engenders the need to extricate oneself from theory and fantasy—which are embedded, for instance, in ideology—by participating in the physical “nowness” of violence. If we are to take Badiou’s words seriously, what well-educated, upper-middle-class terrorists really desire is their (re)entry into the real world through a reinvigorated sensation about who they are and how they can make a difference in the world they live in. In a way, for them, participating in a terrorist organization is felt as a means of interfering critically with the mechanics of the universe. That feeling is moral and aesthetic insofar as it concerns the agony of individual existence and the possibility of an attempted living through the senses.

Upper-middle-class, elitist or not, terrorists are usually seen as individuals facing personal issues that have to do with their own (lack of) self-confidence as well as the power games they are caught up in. Franz Fanon, eminent political theorist and
psychiatrist from the French colony of Martinique, was a staunch believer in the utility of forceful anti-colonial struggle, and held that violence is a “cleansing force” which liberates the troubled youth from her “inferiority complex” and “inaction” turning her into a being with inner strength and determination. On the other hand, Joseph Conrad, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, thinks of terrorists as “fools victimized by ideas they cannot possibly believe. . . . While they mouth slogans or even practice anarchist beliefs, their motives are the result of self-display, power plays, class confusion, acting out roles.” Conrad here unravels the consciously, or not, performative and theatrical dimension of terrorism, the pretentiousness that is often implicit in the articulation of terrorist dogmas as well as the lust for real power that characterizes many terrorists who, for example, while decrying the immorality and arbitrariness of state authorities, are, in essence, more than willing to take over from them and exercise just as harsh a violence as soon as they come into power themselves.

1.3 Totalitarian terror, philosophy and the Real

The totalitarian regimes established in Europe in the immediate aftermath of “successful” revolutions during the first half of the twentieth century are perfect exemplifications of the hypocrisy (also implied in Conrad’s reference to “class confusion” and “power play” above) occasionally characterizing former revolutionaries who, when finally coming to power, resort to monstrosities that are very similar to, or even worse than, those committed by the previous regime. A case in point was, of course, the Jacobins’ reign of terror in the eighteenth century, whose twentieth-century equivalent was the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 and Stalin’s subsequent politics of purging the state of its own dissidents. The 1930s saw the rise of totalitarian regimes like those of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and, of course, Stalinist Russia, and prepared the ground for a conceptual shift in the meaning of terrorism which, as a term, would no longer denote exclusively anti-government, revolutionary, violence but would expand to the violence—more specifically, the terror—exerted by a totalitarian state against its own people as well. But what is totalitarianism?
[The term is used] to refer to regimes under which a population is completely subjugated to a political system that aspires to total domination of the collective over the individual. Totalitarian regimes strive to invade and control their citizenry’s social, economic, political, and personal life. Such forms of government are typically permeated by a secular or theocratic ideology that professes a set of supreme, absolute values that are propagated by the leadership. Repression of individual rights and loyalty to that ideology are their salient characteristics. . . . Because totalitarian governments want to transform human nature, they exercise thought control and control moral education. In other words, repression is carried out not only against people’s actions but also against their thoughts.²⁸

Physical violence is just one of the main tools employed by a totalitarian regime. Fear, psychological coercion, mental manipulation and brain-washing are other, far more important methods of terrorizing a population into submission, as has been beautifully shown by George Orwell in his ominously allegorical novel entitled 1984. The despot in a repressive regime is both a political and religious leader with almost supernatural powers, who supposedly unifies the citizens under the banner of solidarity and collectivity. The populace is thus made to believe in an ostensible kind of togetherness, which is, though, uniformity or collective apathy in disguise. The terrorism or terror of the people, inspired by the politico-religious leader but disseminated by his utterly dehumanizing bureaucratic machines and institutions, consists in imbuing every person with the idea that she has no right to function as an autonomous individual. Totalitarian ideology dictates that individual initiative amounts to high treason; the only “individual,” who, after all, is not an individual anymore because he has been elevated to the status of a Godly figure, is the despot or dictator.

In general, terror is exercised on the citizens when the latter do not seem to subscribe to the (one and only) political party’s utopian ideology. In the Soviet Union, Stalin deemed an enemy of the state someone who would not openly and enthusiastically endorse the universalist vision about the establishment of an eternally classless society in which humankind would allegedly thrive; whereas in Nazi Germany, Hitler’s ideology capitalized on the establishment of a Thousand-Year Reich built upon the idea of the superiority of the Aryan race.
Despite the dominance of the “terror” ingredient in both instances, there are fundamental differences between insurgent, anti-state terrorism and totalitarian, state terror(ism). Both undoubtedly aspire to ignite fear and the feeling of insecurity, but they do it for different purposes and in ways that appeal differently to the aesthetic sensibilities of the people. Revolutionary, anti-government terrorism uses violence in order to generate fear “with the aim of destabilizing or degrading an existing social order,” whereas state terror uses violence “to generate fear with the aim of stabilizing or preserving an existing social order (my emphasis).”

Thus, terrorists “aim to promote chaos and disarray” as they want “people running for cover. The perpetrators of state terror want . . . people marching in step. Spectacular acts of public violence are designed to produce disruption and panic. The shadowy operations of secret police . . . produce silence . . . and the desire to make oneself inconspicuous. . . .”

In different terms, the noise from an anti-state terrorist outrage is deafening, whereas the methods and effects of state terror are much more insidious and noiseless but just as effective on the citizens’ minds. In fact, the apparent absence of a reasonable and visible cause of fear under a totalitarian regime creates, paradoxically, evermore terror and panic in people’s hearts.

What twentieth-century totalitarian terror addressed, according to contemporary philosophy, was the possibility of acting in and for the present and not for the sake of an indefinable future—Nazism’s “final solution” exemplifies precisely that. For Badiou, the twentieth century is not a century of ideologies in the sense of the “imaginary and the utopian” like the century before, but rather the time for feeling the importance of “what is immediately practicable, here and now.” He later adds rhetorically: “What does the century have to say about itself? At any rate, that it is not the century of promise, but that of realization. It is the century of the act, of the effective, of the absolute present, and not the century of portent, of the future,” like the nineteenth century.

Arguably, in this century of “the absolute present” it is the state that has monopoly on terror and violence, not anti-state entities. Especially after the Second World War, the nation-state may exert asymmetric, terrorist violence by exempting itself “from the rule of law: it gives itself permission to do whatever it deems necessary to crush the enemy, and it, the state, alone will decide when it is safe to return to normality,” argues Gene Ray. In this phase of emergency and exemption, the state mobilizes “all techno-instrumental capacities toward political ends, including the end of terror.” In other words, a nation-state may initiate a terror program on the
enemy through the use of enhanced technology—for instance, the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and also feel free to terminate that program whenever it wishes. That kind of eruption of sophisticated technological violence could indeed be linked, according to Ray, to the notion of the sublime as conceived in contemporary times: it would be the contemporary sublime.

After World War II, the meaning of terrorism changed again as it assumed revolutionary connotations once more. Certain anti-colonialist groups in Algeria, Cyprus or Kenya that fought for the independence of the indigenous populations from the colonial rule were typically treated like terrorist organizations by colonial powers. The aforementioned National Liberation Front (FLN) struggling for Algeria’s independence from 1954 to 1962 was probably the last organization to engage in violent anti-colonial activity after the War. The FLN finally succeeded in forcing the French out of Algeria but not without enlarging the scope of its activities to include the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians—by bombing bars packed with students, for instance—in order to attract international attention.

In the 1960s and 70s, the main faces of terrorism were still revolutionary but there was a new development: the rise of radical nationalist and ethnic separatist groups such as the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO) or the Basque ETA. These terrorist organizations were entirely ideologically motivated, while images of the extremely violent incidents they engaged themselves in were widely disseminated through the media of the time—mainly the TV—which contributed to the “internationalization” of the terrorist event, that is, its transformation from a “local” event into one that grasped the attention of, implicated emotionally or even fascinated millions of other people/viewers from many countries. In the case of the PLO, terrorism’s internationalism became even more reinforced because of the highly inventive, unexpected and extremely effective methodology adopted. The specific tactic of hijacking passenger aircraft, not simply to divert them towards different destinations but also to bomb them or capture innocent international travelers as hostages added, through the help of “live” televisual transmissions, to the attractiveness and spectacularity of the terrorist act and turned the terrorist frequently into a heroic figure and the terrifying event into an object of international fascination.

In the late 1960s, it wasn’t just Palestinian terrorism that emerged as a modern internationalized phenomenon; movements of Left-Wing terrorism made their appearance in countries that belonged to the developed and affluent world, such as the
USA, West Germany, Italy, Greece and others. It was the highly anti-militaristic spirit of the 60s that gave rise to a newly-awakened political consciousness as well as a rebellious frame of thinking that opposed the complacency and apathy of the Western world which was supposedly wallowing in filthy consumerism and decadent opulence. The Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany and the Marxist Leninist Red Brigades in Italy during the 1970s stand out as groups that denounced precisely the lifestyle of the West and, in the latter case, even pursued Italy’s withdrawal from the NATO coalition. It could be said that such groups, born of thriving democracies, took their lead from or, in some instances, imitated the Palestinian fighters’ innovative practices and methodologies. In fact, the RAF was trained by the PLO at its guerilla camps in Jordan before it returned to Germany to implement its newly-gained knowledge in real terrorist action.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a considerable decline in leftist and ethnic separatist terrorism and a simultaneous rise in religious terrorism. By 1995 almost half of the terrorist organizations around the globe were of religious nature. One of the basic reasons for the reappearance of religion as motivation for terror relates to the Iranian Revolution, back in 1979, which turned Iran into an Islamic republic whose major intention was to spread the Islamic fundamentalist law across Muslim countries. The fall of the Wall of Berlin and the decline of Communism which marked the end of the Cold War almost a decade later were additional significant factors for the onset of religious terrorism, insofar as a New World Order—spearheaded by the specter of global Capitalism—was established as the sole legitimate ideological power on the planet. Now, what are the main characteristics of religious terrorism? For the religious terrorist violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators therefore often disregard the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists. Whereas secular terrorists, even if they have the capacity to do so, rarely attempt indiscriminate killing on a truly massive scale because such tactics . . . are regarded counterproductive, if not immoral, religious terrorists often seek the elimination of broadly defined categories of enemies and accordingly regard such large-scale violence not only as
morally justified but as necessary expedients for the attainment of their goals.\textsuperscript{35}

Religious terrorism, that is, has its own transcendental ethics that far surpasses, especially in its modern and “ultramodern” variations—post-1980 and-1990 Islamist/Jihadist terrorism—conventional (human) morality and the unwritten laws of compassion and sensitivity.

As already seen, religious terrorism is hardly a new phenomenon. The Zealots and the Sicarri during the Roman occupation of Judea mentioned above; the Thugs, a cult from India committing, for nearly a period of a thousand years (starting off in the seventh century), acts of sacrificial terrorism against unsuspecting victims in honor of Kali, goddess of death and destruction; the Assassins, a Muslim group springing from the Shi’a Ismaili sect, fighting against the Christian invaders of Syria and the neighboring lands between AD 1090 and 1272; the Catholic subversion of Protestantism in Europe in the early modern period—as illustrated previously by the Gunpowder Plot incident—typified the historical symbiosis of religion and violence in Europe and elsewhere and set the stage for the flourishing of modern-day religious terrorism.\textsuperscript{36} The brutality of Al-Qaeda and, most recently, of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) raised the bar for terrorism by redefining ruthlessness, cruelty and even the meaning of terror itself in the twenty-first century.

At the time of writing this project, Islamist fundamentalism is dramatically challenging our traditional conception of terrorism as a phenomenon which is allegedly too remote to have any real repercussion on the Western citizen. The 9/11 terrorist attacks sent a message that was loud and clear: no one is safe anywhere in the world because no one is to be exempted from the threat of terrorism. And if the repetition, on our TV sets, of the video footage of the passenger aircraft smashing into the WTC aestheticized, uncannily, the terrorist outrage by turning it into some kind of fiction (we don’t get to see any real blood or the suffering of the victims), the unprecedented atrocities committed by ISIS—beheadings or even crucifixions of hostages in front of a camera—and uploaded, in real time, on the internet by the terrorists themselves leave us no option but to interpret their unspeakable actions as the advent of the horrifically but authentically real. A new kind of “propaganda by the deed” is looming in the horizon insofar as the crudity of a terrorist act overshadows, dwarfs, the ideological or political premise it is allegedly based upon. The reality of gruesomeness emerges as something that is above and beyond theoretical, ideological,
or political legitimization. In a nutshell, religious fundamentalist terror at the turn of the twenty-first century is one of the platforms upon which flourishes the real as material, rather than virtual or metaphysical, reality.

The media are very important not just in communicating the terrorist act but also in making it happen, since no act of political violence can be deemed effective or successful (in putting its point across) unless it is made known to the general public (in the case of terrorist violence from its early forms up until the 1960s) or shown to it (from the late twentieth century onwards). In other words, the media are complicit in the occurrence of the terrorist act to the extent that it is the terrorizing image of the deed that draws attention to the political (?) objective of the terrorists by appealing to the sensibility of those that attest to the horror of that image. As I argue, one cannot possibly discuss terrorism and the politics of it without referring to aesthetics, since, to put it philosophically, the terrorist event constitutes an aesthetic experience of the unexpected—a “successful” terrorist attack is one that no one anticipates. Moreover, precisely because there are no specific root-causes for the phenomenon of terrorism, we can’t (and shouldn’t) try to rationalize it. In order to truly understand terrorist violence and capture its magnitude we will probably have to “tone down” our reasoning capacities and simultaneously engage our senses and imagination. If we could feel, or imagine, the excruciating pain and horror of the victim of terrorism, we would likely be able to capture the intrinsic irrationality of terrorism.
Notes

1. Later, however, Herodotus as well as Aristotle debunked the Liberators or “Tyrannicides” by alluding to the danger of confusing criminal murder with revolutionary action.
6. Of course, as we have seen, terrorists usually claim to have a morality that is superior to the conventional morality of the others. No terrorist admits that she is immoral.
7. In a 2005 *ITV* programme called *The gunpowder Plot: Exploding the Legend*, an exact replica of the House of Lords was constructed and subsequently destroyed with gunpowder so that the effects of the explosion could be studied more diligently. The experiment demonstrated that the explosion planned by Guy Fawkes would have been lethal for all members of the Parliament. See Adam Sherwin, “Gunpowder plotters get their wish, 400 years on,” timesonline.co.uk, October 31, 2005, accessed February 10, 2015.
10. This report was an address delivered at the National Convention (February 1794). Excerpt taken from *Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror*, retrieved January 10, 2015, from http://www.fordam.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html and Modern
12. Law, p. 63.
13. Ibid., p. 64.
15. Law, pp. 70-1.
21. Ibid., p. 266.
26. See Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 94. Fanon was of the opinion that Algeria could get rid of the French rule only if it
resorted to violence. No wonder he was a source of inspiration for the National Liberation Front (FLN), a “terrorist” organization that began, in 1954, its own struggle for Algeria’s independence from France.


30. Ibid., p. 15.


32. Ibid., p. 58.


34. Hoffman, p. 86.

35. Ibid., pp. 88-9.

36. In fact, for the Assassins, sacrificing themselves during a deed of terror against Christians was not only an act of honor but a real duty towards God and the holy writings. In that sense, they could be viewed as the exact precursors of today’s Islamist and Jihadist terrorists.
Bibliography


CHAPTER 2

Twenty-first-century Terrorism:
Politics and Aesthetic Sensibility
2.1 Symbolism and anarchism

In April 1894, a fancy Paris neighborhood was shaken by the dreadful noise of an explosion. The prestigious Foyot restaurant was almost destroyed by a home-made bomb which had been secretly placed by anarchists. There was nothing strange or out of the ordinary about revolutionary violence or terrorist, anarchist action in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. A number of other cases of gruesome violence had already been recorded before the bombing under discussion. The interesting part of that incident had to do with the irony that one of the persons that were injured by the bomb detonation, the poet Laurent Tailhade, was a famous sympathizer of revolutionary anarchism who, only a couple of weeks before, had had no scruples to comment in the following way upon the bloodthirstiness of an earlier terrorist strike: “What does it matter if insignificant lives are lost, as long as the gesture is beautiful?” Regardless of the ingenuousness, or not, of the comment which was thought of as callous by journalists and the public opinion of the time, Tailhade’s words are, of course, suggestive of “a means-to-an-end” philosophy, in which case “beautiful gesture” means the successful fulfillment of a purpose, but they may as well betray terrorism’s complicity with aesthetics. In the latter case, the emphasis is placed either on the spectacularity and the “beautiful” (?) form of the act, or on the attractiveness of it connected directly with the satisfaction that an anarchist would derive from looking at the outcome of her deeds, the very image of destruction and, in a way, her very own “work of art.” What is common in all of the above options is the aesthetic instinct that is activated not in the face of terrorist destruction but because of it; it is an instinct or unconscious sensibility that underlies, and largely determines, not just the impact of a terrorist act but also its comprehension and assimilation by outsiders, both on a political and personal level.

The very concept “aesthetics,” which derives from the Greek word “aesthesis,” “was introduced by Baumgarten to name the science of sensory knowledge that is directed toward beauty. On this reading, art epitomizes sense perception as the perfection of sensory awareness.” Therefore, when we use the term “aesthetics” we usually take it to mean the aesthetics of the so-called “beautiful” or the appreciation of a work of art, both of which represent the traditional and rather conventional
definitions of it. There is a third meaning, however, which takes us back to the etymological basis of the word: sense perception. This version of aesthetics encompasses the entire perceptual dimension of human experience including not just art and nature appreciation but the entire range of everyday activity. Such experiences “engage us in an intensely sensory field in which we participate wholly and without reservation, as we customarily do with works of art.”

Terrorist action does not, of course, qualify as “everyday activity,” but exactly on account of its un-ordinariness and extremeness it manages to heighten our imaginative capacities by sharpening our instinct for visual, auditory, and other, experiences. Taking the lead from Tailhade’s poetic version of anarchy, the main focus of this chapter will be precisely on the role of aesthetics as sensibility, image, or symbolic language in committing a terrorist act, representing it as well as understanding it cognitively and imaginatively. Deeply woven into the aesthetic dimension of terrorism is undoubtedly the question of the political which is an indispensable element to consider when delving into such an urgent matter as terrorism.

If the efficacy of the propaganda of the deed lies in favoring the act, in its terrible immediacy, over the word as a theoretical—and thus ineffective—mode of legitimizing an insurgent ideology and practice, what could be said of a propaganda of . . . the word that re-enacts, on a figurative level, the materiality and cruelty of the terrorist deed? Paul Brousse, later leader of the Possibilist socialist party, flirted with the idea of a language that would be so poetically revolutionary that it would manage to cross into the world of the tangibly real, flaunting its sarcasm against an easy distinction between metaphorical and non-metaphorical violence—the word and the deed, respectively: “The idea will not appear on paper, nor in a journal, nor in a painting; it will not be sculpted in marble, nor carved in stone, nor cast in bronze: it will walk, in flesh and bone, alive, before the people. The people will salute it as it passes by.”

By announcing that the “explosive” idea will not appear on paper or cast in bronze, Brousse banishes the sterile metaphoricity of ideas from the real political world with which terrorism interferes, and simultaneously, introduces into that world a new kind of figurativeness, a literary quality that is able to reanimate symbolism as a powerful instrument of revolution as well reestablishing an authentic connection between the signifying language (the revolutionary word) and its referent (the world in which the word speaks). After all, what “better way to account (in theory) for the eruption of figuration generated by a terrorist act than through figurative language
itself?" Paradoxically, terrorists employ figuration or literariness at the very moment that they claim to leave it behind. As the French anarchist Auguste Vaillant said, “[t]he more they are deaf, the more your voice must thunder out so that they will understand you.”

In 1920, the Luigi Galleani anarchist organization put a bomb on Wall Street, New York to protest against capitalism and social injustice. It was a horse-drawn wagon bomb detonated at lunchtime with bustling crowds passing by. This is how Paul Berman describes this non-fastidious act of terrorism which was only second to the 1910 bombing of the Los Angeles Times, the first massive act of terrorist violence on American soil:

The bomb killed a random crowd of thirty-three people. . . . Why detonate an explosive on Wall Street? For symbolic reasons, of course. And why kill those thirty-three people in particular? For no reason. Because they happened to be walking by. . . . Galleani’s idea was to commit an aesthetic act of terror—“aesthetic” was his own word—in which the beauty or artistic quality consisted in murdering anonymously. Here the nihilism was unlimited, and the transgression, total.7

It is too difficult to contest the uncanny similarity between this early twentieth-century atrocity and various acts of extreme, indiscriminate violence perpetrated towards the close of the same century and the dawn of the next. We can easily recognize in the Wall Street bombing the same logic that governed the 9/11 terrorists. The symbolism is the same—the idea is to hit the building that represents the center of finance and a fortress of capitalism—and the methodology looks very familiar to twenty-first-century spectators: innocent passers-by were included in this lethal game of anarchist vengeance (two members of the organization had already been incarcerated a few months before). Apparently, the symbolism of the act was valued much more than the innocence of the by-standers. The Galleani group’s deep-seated reasoning and the state’s own logic were poles apart from each other. The former’s subversive nihilist logic of maximum lethality which implicated even people that were not directly associated with the intolerable “tyranny” of capitalism ran counter to the latter’s common laws as well as the unwritten laws of conventional morality regarding the sparing of innocent lives and the non-targeting of civilians. In fact, the terrorists’ anti-state and “anti-moral” (so to speak) mentality was, in many ways, determined by the government’s opposition to them. Simply said, the state played by
some commonly acceptable rules that the anarchists refused to accept, that refusal being precisely the quintessence of anarchy if we go back to its etymological roots— anarchy as “un-arche,” the condition of being and living without an “arche,” that is, without a rule.

Generally speaking, terrorism has always relied upon the determination with which states and government institutions preserve certain moral codes of war and humanitarian distinctions such as military and non-military personnel, civilians and non-civilians or combatants and noncombatants. It is such codes and moral distinctions that render them vulnerable in the eyes of a terrorist, in the sense that the latter refrains from upholding any rules and codes of the kind, and thereby has the upper hand in a hide-and-seek power game:

Terrorist tactics rely entirely on conventional armies maintaining these distinctions, while they themselves openly thwart them. . . . If their adversaries were to match their nihilism by denying the status of non-combatants and the distinction between belligerents and civilians, choosing to terrorize the latter with their superior force, [states and governments] would once again have the upper hand, rendering the smaller scale terrorism of the “underdog” totally ineffective.8

In all kinds of senses, therefore, terrorism is “black,” metaphorically speaking, because the authorities are “white.” We would have to admit that the very reversibility of the rules relativizes the legitimacy of either side and reveals an intrinsic aesthetic of domination which far surpasses ideology and political motivation. According to that kind of relativizing, in case, for instance, governmental and state power broke consciously the rules of morality, humanitarianism, and just war by disrespecting the lives of noncombatants, terrorists would have to upgrade their tactical methodology or reinvent themselves by adopting different moral (or immoral) standards or raising the stakes for terror if they did not want to face extinction. In other words, there seems to be no transcendental law securing for terrorists a potential ethical advantage deriving from a supposedly “natural” superiority of revolutionary ideology over the opponent’s own ideology. So, if the state became itself terrorist in adopting the same asymmetric tactics to gain maximum results, where would the real terrorists be? Even more seriously, how would the terrorists retain their advantage of novelty in terms of the aesthetic of terrorist innovation, which is indispensable for creating the desired effects?
In light of the aforementioned Galleani terrorist incident, the anarchist principle that dictated the necessity for creating an “aesthetic” act of terror whose “beauty” and artistry consisted in killing haphazardly and “anonymously” bears proto-fascist, even futurist-like, resonances in the sense of turning a politics of anti-capitalist revolution into an aesthetics of a terrorizing panorama. The terrorist is conceptualized here as the unconventional artist who creates unprecedented images with materials made from human pain and horror, and disseminates, in her own equivocally aesthetic ways, a political message that can be felt rather than merely understood intellectually. At issue is a politics of terrorist aesthetics, or a politics that communicates its agenda via the aesthetics of terror. But how can there be beauty in murdering anonymously and unleashing a blatantly unjust kind of terror against people that appear to be irrelevant to one’s own revolutionary cause? Even Kant was of the opinion that violence and war had something sublime in them, but only as long as human rights were respected and certain rules observed. Otherwise war would just be hell on earth:

Even war, if it is conducted with order and reverence for the rights of civilians, has something sublime in it, and at the same time makes the mentality of the people who conduct it in this way all the more sublime, the more dangers it has been exposed to and before which it has been able to assert its courage; whereas a long peace causes the spirit of mere commerce to predominate, along with base selfishness, cowardice and weakness.

Kant looks at the sublime as that feeling of terror mixed with pleasure generated at the sight of nature’s forcefulness that simultaneously repulses and attracts us, causing us eventually to rise above it by ascertaining our freedom and independence from it. Through this Kantian logic, an “orderly” kind of war that does not target noncombatants and respects civilians may indeed turn raw violence into an aesthetic image of unparalleled beauty, a picture that contains (hence, limits) the cruelty within the bounds of its own framing, thereby ensuring the safety of the spectator and securing the unobstructed appreciation of an art “in the making.” The terrorist dogma of indiscriminate killing and mindless bloodbath, as encapsulated in the Wall Street bombing incident, would obviously go against the Kantian imperative of honorable conduct during war and, in effect, could by no means be seen as sublime or beautiful. Yet, presumably even the prospect of a shockingly synaesthetic (translated as “activating many senses at once”) picture that would disrupt dramatically the daily routine of life and economy in capitalist America might sound like a flawless
symphony and an ethereal kind of “music” in the ears of the perpetrators. From this perspective, the Kantian model of containing purposeless terror as a mode of unveiling the inherent beauty of (military) conflict would not do the job for the Galleani organization. Something more extreme was needed; something that would push the boundaries of “artistic” beauty even further.\footnote{11}

Pushing boundaries is hardly far from terrorism’s purposes or potentialities, both in its older as well as in more modern forms of it. Actually, it is built into the very idea of terrorism to the extent that it engenders an aesthetic, and a rhetoric, of excess. A terrorist event constitutes a political statement which is formulated as such through the indispensable assistance of excess. The difference is that such a kind of excess does not point to something excessive, luxurious or redundant but rather to a necessary quality that is already inherent in the living organism and waiting to be expressed aesthetically, that is, through the senses. This version of excess is not unrelated to Georges Bataille’s conceptualizing of material excess in the work \textit{The Accursed Share}. Therein, Bataille maintains that “both nature and society obey a pattern of excess rather than scantiness and limited resources,” adding that “a living organism receives much more energy than it needs, and that this excess of energy is not only inevitable but has to be dispersed else it becomes destructive, turning against the organism.”\footnote{12} Philosophically speaking, Bataille’s idea of material excess might well serve to explain terrorist outrages against the dominant economic system as a way of channeling one’s own surplus of energy and desire into activities that privilege the aesthetic and violent, or the “violently” aesthetic. Terrorist excess is unquestionably aesthetic because, as has been eloquently argued, regardless of “the categories involved (beauty, ugliness, magnificence or the grotesque) excess is linked to the aesthetic in that it captures attention, engages our sensibility and seizes our imagination not only through art but in everyday life. . . . We may react with pleasure or displeasure to the excessive, but we can never remain indifferent to it. Excess is never aesthetically neutral.”\footnote{13}
2.2 Total Revolution as totalitarian terror: The authentic and the sublime

As we have already stated, terrorism appeared first as state terror, that is, terrorism that operated in the name and interests of the state. State terrorism might initially have been practiced by the Jacobins during the period after the French Revolution, but it assumed its horrifying dimensions during the first half of the twentieth century with the inauguration of totalitarian one-party dictatorships in Europe, and more particularly in Russia and Germany.

It was a group of people who had gathered in St. Petersburg, in February 1917, to protest against Russia’s participation in the Great War that prepared the ground for the dissolution of the Russian empire. Those protests were quickly followed by the Bolsheviks’ coup d’etat later that year which marked Russia’s exit from the war and the establishment of a dictatorship that would implement a radically new program based upon socialist values. One of the lessons that we can learn from studying the history of terrorism is that “acts carried out by subversive groups provide a treasure trove of tactics and strategies that are as murderously useful to repressive regimes.”

Although Lenin and the Bolsheviks had dismissed the importance and usefulness of individual terrorism and the anti-state violence inflicted by anarchist groups in the previous years, they did practice it without reservation or hesitation when they came to power themselves. By imitating the propagandist and conspiratorial tactics of the Narodnya Volya (People’s Will) as well as appropriating radical anarchist demands for a revolution that would be ignited in the name of the people, the Bolsheviks consolidated their dictatorial regime—or the dictatorship of the proletariat—with an iron fist and unswerving terror. Lenin himself was convinced of the necessity of terrorist methods in the new status quo so that the ultimate goal—people’s revolution—would be attained. The Bolsheviks set up a police network called the Extraordinary Commission (or Cheka) which would forcibly support the new “socialist” ideas by oppressing the rights of the population and sowing the seed of fear in the minds of the citizens. Lenin had declared war on the rich and any other “parasite” and encouraged everyone to participate in the new cause of uprooting “evil” from the country.
In the summer of 1918 there arose political forces that opposed the Bolsheviks—a mixture of anarchists, monarchists and socialists—and attempted to destabilize the new state. This marked the beginning of the Russian civil war. Acts of outrage such as the assassination of the German ambassador to Soviet Russia or the failed attempt at Lenin’s and Trotsky’s lives (the latter being Lenin’s close associate) enraged the Bolsheviks who thought that the Revolution was at risk and that there were counter-revolutionary conspiracies against the People, woven both at home as well as abroad. Their immediate reaction was to unleash the so-called “Red Terror” in order to fend off the enemies of the state contemplating the overthrow of the new order. In fact, they passed a decree that authorized the execution of all counter-revolutionaries. As a newspaper promoting the Bolshevik cause proclaimed, for the blood of Lenin, “let there be floods of bourgeois blood—more blood, as much as possible.” What was needed was not just the blood of those directly involved in anti-Bolshevik activities but also of others who might potentially present a threat to the existing regime in the future. As is apparent, the violence of the state was unleashed against everyone, even the innocent. As the Bolshevik commissar of justice said to his comrades, “[w]e must execute not only the guilty. Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more.” The new order had succeeded in legitimating mass oppression, intimidation, and annihilation. As Randall Law reveals, [Bolshevik] terror was proactive, in the sense that people were arrested for their potential opposition to Soviet power. Violence was thus both targeted and symbolic, meant to destroy active members and cow the broad population. . . . In this regard, the Soviets went well beyond what the Jacobins practiced in the French Reign of Terror. This was propaganda of the deed used on behalf of the state, rather than against it. The Cheka remained a power unto itself, virtually a state within a state, taking directions from a handful of hardcore Bolsheviks at the top. Experts have estimated that the Bolsheviks, primarily the Cheka, executed from 50,000 to 200,000 people from the start of the Red Terror into the early 1920s.

After Lenin’s death, it was Joseph Stalin who emerged as leader of the Communist party, resorting to terrorist methods in order to intimidate the population and force them into unwavering submission. What was missing, though, was an act of provocation carried out by ostensibly anti-state terrorists but, in essence, by his very agents. He had a popular member of the Party, Sergei Kirov, murdered and blamed
The assassination was the excuse he needed for getting rid of his future rivals and other dangerous comrades. Soon he announced the targeting of all those that were implicated in “acts of terror.” Those captured faced death by immediate execution, but the extraordinary thing was that Stalin usually persecuted his own comrades who were faithful to the Communist cause. By setting up perfectly-orchestrated trials, he condemned to death fourteen other communists for allegedly participating in a terrorist conspiracy against the state and the leader himself. In this way, he was supposedly setting a good example for the Soviet people, of how enemies of the Soviet Union should be treated.

In the late 1930s, Stalinist terror reached unprecedented levels, leading thousands of suspected dissidents to their deaths. From a certain point onwards, the order of the day was sheer paranoia deriving from the mistaken assumption that terrorists and other enemies of the country were always lurking around the corner, ready to create an outrage, subvert the quick industrialization of the nation, or destabilize the revolutionary regime: “As in France in the 1790s, terror was a system intended to fragment society and reshape it according to new goals and standards. Terror was violence, symbolic as well as physical, and was meant to educate people about the necessity of vigilance, obedience, and self-sacrifice.”

The “education,” or rather “edification” of the citizen by the state is seminal for the inculcation of the mentality of submissiveness in individual consciousness. In general, subjects living under a totalitarian regime are continually exposed to various mythical narratives hinging upon the idea that their country is under constant attack by outside forces or internal corrosive networks and therefore they need to devote themselves entirely to their leader’s purposes and vision by being always on the alert for potential foreign agencies that attempt to disrupt the peace and order of the state. Stalin’s terror narrative would emphasize that the state is never sufficiently secure from outside threats, never substantially “free” from future corruption—never absolutely pure. Lyotard calls attention to state terror’s grand narrative about people’s “necessary” emancipation:

Terror acts on the suspicion that nothing is emancipated enough—and makes it into a politics. Every particular reality is a plot against the pure, universal will. Even the individual who occupies the position of the normative instance is contingent in the light of this ideal, and therefore suspect. . . . The suppression of reality through the death of suspects
satisfies a logic that sees reality as a plot against the Idea. And terror in this way plunges the real community into despair about its identity. If the “Idea” concerns the “perfect” and absolute (or total, hence “totalizing”) emancipation from the previous status quo—monarchy, for instance—and the cultivation of a seamless socialist spirit and mentality, then reality itself is seen as conspiring against it (the Idea). And since everyone partaking of that reality-plot is inevitably suspect, because already susceptible to that reality, it follows that all citizens are candidates for extinction and therefore in constant fear of the state and their fellow comrades. All citizens turn out to be inimical towards the “universal will” and consequently have to be subjected to the politics of annihilation. The liquidation of the innocent, yet somehow guilty citizens in a totalitarian state is justified by another grand narrative: the repetitive assertion of the supposed legitimacy of the ruling class (the Party). The declaration or articulation of that legitimacy yields, paradoxically, further credence to the Party’s ideologies and truthfulness. This artificial doubling of legitimacy is carried out, in Lyotard’s words, as a narrative—and therefore intrinsically aesthetic—“vicious circle” that serves to provide the state with the ultimate weapon: the willful submission of the individual to the official totalitarian narrative of the state; indeed, it serves the purpose of total and absolute servitude.

Albert Camus, in *The Rebel* (1951), talks about how all revolutionary thinking, such as the one engendering the French revolution or the Bolshevik uprising, has “servitude” and “terror” written all over it, as though it were inevitably too demanding, and thus too inhuman, to sustain the project (and the prospect) of any real meaningful change for the good of humanity. In fact, he argues that servitude is the real target of the twentieth century:

> Historical thought was to deliver man from subjection to a divinity; but this liberation demanded of him the most absolute subjection to historical evolution. Then man takes refuge in the concept of the permanence of the party in the same way that he formerly prostrated himself before the altar. That is why the era which dares to claim that it is the most rebellious that has ever existed only offers a choice of various types of conformity. The real passion of the twentieth century is servitude.

What Camus means is that humanity, during the course of the twentieth century, never managed to find the middle ground between such opposites as “subjection to divinity” and “subjection to the (secular) Party.” And since the latter—the Party—
reserved for itself the right to ignite a revolution, the very desire for revolution and emancipation backfired by turning radicality into utter conformity and rendering the idea of a revolution into just an empty name or pretext for absolute servitude and subjection: The “global revolutionary impulses set loose by the Russian Revolution of 1917 only reached exhaustion with . . . the channeling of emancipatory processes into bureaucratic one-party states . . . [while] the defeat of revolutionary desire, as it was put into practice in the struggles of the twentieth century, was accomplished by massive applications of violence and coercions of all kinds. . . .”23

Historical evolution and progress emerge as deterrents against man’s self-recognition and self-identification as not merely a cog in the machine of impersonal systems and concepts like the Party, the Leader, History, Emancipation, or Freedom. The state exerts an aesthetic politics of terror upon the individual by imposing upon her a myth or narrative of liberation. However, Camus’ excerpt above helps us realize that humanity needs to retrieve the aesthesis of being “human” by eschewing conceptual and idealist thinking and by attending to the particular—the unique circumstance, the detail, the exception, the inconceivable. Otherwise, the need to feel the (pulse of the) real degenerates into the plight of having to feel the yoke of real terror. On the other hand, it happens, at times, that the citizen’s lust for revolution and change turns into a quasi-masochistic wish to feel tyrannical terror as a way of experiencing the real thing (authentic reality), in which case what is at stake is a situation of unconscious complicity between ruler and ruled, or the terrorist state and the terrorized subject.

The dilemma encountered by all revolutionary movements that finally authenticate themselves by coming to power is whether to continue to be revolutionary or simply “settle down” by accommodating their revolutionary vision to the reality of practical government. Usually, before a revolutionary movement has risen from the margins of society to become the government, as in the case of the October 1917 Revolution, it offers optimistic narratives of emancipation for the future to come; narratives that are directly opposed to an inauthentic, grim and pessimistic present under unpopular and oppressive rulers. However, when the dream of the revolution comes true and a new revolutionary government is finally established, the leader of the revolution is called upon to deliver on her former promises by immediately converting what was simply a vision of an optimistic future into a palpably utopian present. In a way, she is required to bring to the people the authentic
and the Real for which they have been waiting, a certain now-ness that will resonate with hope and happiness. But given that the revolution cannot “pause” or terminate its course (because that would contradict the official revolutionary ideology and because allegedly more needs to be done before the revolution has fulfilled its aims), the people can have no access to that utopian and happy present they were promised. The authentic and the Real will just have to wait while the people will have to keep on being on the alert for would-be enemies of their future.

If the revolutionary ruler is not in a position to yield the authentic and the Real in the form of the beautiful or the utopian, she will offer them in its opposite form, as Terror and sublime violence. Perhaps this is what Zizek has in mind when he connects Stalinist Terror with the passion for authenticity as experienced by Brecht:

When Brecht, on the way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, passed the column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the Stalinallee to crush the workers’ rebellion, he waved at them and wrote in his diary later that day that, at that moment, he (never a party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party. It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity.24

In Zizek’s opinion, Brecht was fascinated with what seemed to him to be epoch-making violence, a kind of Terror that, in its eerily aesthetic immediacy, ran counter to the “un-aesthetic” (that is, “indolent” and invisible) triviality of mundane reality. Terror was repackaged as the aesthetic fulfillment of the revolutionary Real in Stalinism whose “brutal ‘passion for the real’ [materialized] in its readiness to sacrifice millions of lives for its goal, to treat people as dispensable.”25

While the terror exerted by a totalitarian regime may be attractive, especially to those who opportunistically play by the rules of the state in order to finally exempt themselves from violent oppression, it always leads to passivity, isolation, and the inculcation of feelings of fear, insecurity as well as powerlessness in the soul of the citizen. All those feelings would be completely without any foundation and logic, but for the terrible latency of the image of death possessing the individual’s heart and mind. Thomas Hobbes assumes that “there is nothing worse than living in constant fear of one’s own violent death. This leaves no time for . . . literature or art. It would be foolish for any rational individual to pursue anything . . . so long as this fear
dominates. To pursue civilization under such conditions is to invite violent death.” For Hobbes, what, in fact, drives humans to do things is not solidarity, love or affection for the others but rather fear of death. And a life of continuous fear is not a life at all. Fear is a powerful tool at the hands of a totalitarian government because, as Hobbes maintains, it keeps citizens from breaking the law: “Of all the passions, that which inclineth men least to break the laws is fear.” This feeling almost amounts to an ineradicable conviction that one will be hurt by something displeasing, repulsive or even terrible.

A very important aspect of persisting fear, according to Hobbes, is its “contagiousness,” the fact that it can be unconsciously communicated from subject to subject, contracted like a virus that moves from one body to the next with no reason whatsoever. In other words, one might feel fear just because the person next to her has that feeling too. Hobbes’ term to describe this situation is “panic terror”—when someone is utterly incapable of apprehending the object or the cause of her fear. Such an ostensibly irrational and unexplainable feeling could just as well be associated with the concept, or rather, aesthetic posture, of the sublime in the Burkean as well as Lyotardian sense. As Lyotard says, we fear something but we do not know what. The sublime has traditionally been associated with terror and, therefore, may have something to tell us about state terror and terrorism. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke foregrounds his notion of the sublime as inherently physical and psychosomatic. In his view, the sublime is “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible . . . or operates in a manner analogous to terror.” Burkean sublimity is not a transcendental ideal—an element standing outside the present moment, on a higher level, or a concept that pertains to the future—but, rather, emphasizes the condition of psychological/emotional helplessness and calls attention to the experience of utter, terrifying distress before something dwarfing the subject. Burke’s notion of the sublime is not a question of elevation but of immanence. By contrast to Kant’s understanding of sublimity as an irreconcilability (between concept and human attempts at imagining it) that the reasoning subject finally manages to transcend intellectually and thus affirm her moral freedom and independence from the violence and enmity of nature, Burke’s own conceptualizing of it focuses on the ineradicable presence of death at the core of the sublime experience; a presence which cannot be surpassed or overshadowed by
any attempts at reason or intellectual comprehension on the part of the subject, whose attitude remains one of contemplative passivity, motionlessness and terror.

Isn’t the Burkean conception of the sublime, as described above, commensurate with Hobbes’ insight concerning the overwhelming feeling of panic terror that petrifies the subject or citizen in a totalitarian state for no apparent or plausible reason, for example, even when there is no visible physical coercion? “Tyranny,” it has been stated, “goes beyond the ‘simple’ violence of, say, execution; it evokes images of madness and sadistic desires run amok. . . . [Such] [i]nwardly directed terror heightens considerably the fear and anxiety of living under despotic regimes.”

Panic terror might be said to evoke the sublime as it was theorized by Burke almost a hundred years later: as an awe-inducing aesthetic experience which cannot be overcome, or as an instant of complete aesthetic stasis provoked by an awareness of the futility of resistance to imminent Terror—such as, say, the subtle terrorism inflicted by totalitarian rule.

As already stated in the introduction, if we view the Kantian and Burkean sublime through the perspective of the twentieth-century horror of totalitarian mass extermination, genocidal terror and nuclear annihilation, we can only make a case for a negative sublime, or the sublime as negative presentation in terms of an individual’s fundamental inability to linguistically capture and meaningfully represent the sublime acts of terror or terrorism committed by entire states in the first half of the previous century: “As an aesthetic category traditionally associated with a feeling of enjoyable terror triggered by mediated encounters with excessive power, the sublime must now bear and reflect this historical predicament [which is characterized] not just by . . . the politics of fear but by . . . a qualitative expansion of official surveillance.” Arguably, the sublime is reconfigured as a negative kind of aesthetics that can only be born witness to by means of the aesthesis (as sense or sensibility) of resignation ignited by the feeling of privation. State Terror in the twentieth century is sublime insofar as it is an aesthesis which is experienced as “un-aesthesis,” or better, an anesthetic quality or shock. To put it plainly, terrorism is sublime because it cannot be felt or intellectually grasped. Lyotard picks up on Burke’s perception of sublimity and makes it into something that is even more immediate than Burke could have allowed, a quality or non-feeling which is permeated by shock and silence before the terror of nothing happening—no improvement of the society, not even death as “redemption.” In “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” Lyotard elaborated this model of sublimity:
Kant may well reject Burke’s thesis as empiricism and physiologism . . . but he strips Burke’s aesthetic of what I consider to be its major stake—to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening. . . . [There is] a passion stronger than satisfaction, and that is pain and impending death [as well as terror before the deadly moment]. Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence. . . . What is terrifying is that the It happens that does not happen, that it stops happening.\textsuperscript{32}

The advent of the sublime moment signifies the end of the It happens that, the end of occurrence, and the subject that bears witness to the advent of that moment is too shocked to speak or act or even feel. The coming of the insidious but terrifying violence of totalitarianism is experienced by the individual as not a typical aesthetic experience at all but as an anesthetic (or unconscious) shock provoked at the sight of impending death—a sight, though, which does not become fully intelligible by the individual or citizen. Lyotard’s contribution to the Burkean sublime consists in unveiling the paradoxical nature of sublimity: something happens now but we do not know what. He points to the elusiveness and inconceivability of the sublime “experience” which proves very helpful in appreciating the nature of terror and terrorism as moments that cannot be rationalized or comprehended by logical, discursive, and representational means—that realization leading also to the adoption of an ethical stance towards terrorism as a sublime (irrational) political occurrence. As Lyotard insists in Heidegger and “the jews”, the sublime is a “shock, since it affects’ a system, but a shock of which the shocked is unaware, and which the apparatus (the mind) cannot register in accordance with and in its internal physics; a shock by which it is not affected.”\textsuperscript{33} Potentially, the subject retains a sense of something happening but she has absolutely no idea what that “something” is. Interpreted in that way, the sublime finds itself in the service of the Party-state as an otherness that works inwardly (that is, from within), a surreptitious terrorizing power which imposes itself upon the ruled by paradoxically not exerting an audibly or visibly aesthetic influence on them.
Notes

1. See “Une bombe. Un attentat anarchiste au restaurant Foyot,” L’ éclair, 6 April 1894.
3. Ibid., p. 175.


15. Lenin’s opinion was that leniency on the part of the revolutionary government was not an option, and that is why he had charged the 1871 Paris Commune with “excessive generosity” and a lack of will to exterminate its enemies. See Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (Vintage, 1990), p. 790.


17. Pipes, p. 822.

18. Law, p. 164.


30. By contrast, Kant’s elaboration of the sublime works under the banner of eventual *resistance* to absolute Terror. In a strange way, then, Kant’s sublime is marked also by a resistance to it. It needs to be stated here that both, Kant
and Burke insinuate in their writings that the feeling of the sublime is somehow accompanied by a feeling of delight, on condition that the subject’s position is remote from the terrifying object of sublimity and the former’s physical existence is by no means endangered by the latter’s terribleness. In Burke’s case, delight means “relief” but not positive pleasure. One discerns, as a result, a certain tendency in both thinkers to create an aesthetic distance between the terrifying object and the viewer, without which (distance) the sublime cannot be experienced. Nonetheless, I dare say, Burke’s focus is more on the utter speechlessness of the subject before the awful immediacy of Terror.

33. Lyotard, Heidegger and “the Jews” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 12.


CHAPTER 3

The Postcolonial World: From the 1950s to the 1980s

The Urban and the International
3.1 Anti-colonial terrorism: The Algerian struggle

The Algerian war of independence from the French colonial rule was one of the most ruthless nationalist struggles in postwar history. The years 1954 and 1962 mark the beginning and the end of the last anti-colonial fight after the Second World War. The Algerian cause was for various reasons immensely popular among other liberation groups and terrorist organizations internationally, from the Palestinian PLO to the freedom fighters of IRA.

The anti-colonial struggle against the French occupation of Algeria was spearheaded by the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale), a military-turned-terrorist organization whose purpose was to call international attention to the problem of colonized Algeria. The country had already been part of France for more than a century (since 1851), therefore it was too hard for the majority of the indigenous population to believe that independence from the French rule was at all feasible. In the beginning of the struggle, the FLN adopted conventional military strategies against the French by mainly engaging in battle on rural territory away from urban centers and the Algerian capital, Algiers. Despite the fact that the revolutionaries were much more familiar with Algeria’s mainland than their enemy, the massive military forces of the colonizers made it impossible for them to make any progress. What is more, the natives (mostly Muslims) were showing little interest in FLN’s ideals and practices while, from a certain point on, they even became frustrated with the organization’s tendency to terrorize the population for what seemed to them to be a “lost” cause.

Precisely because it all seemed futile, a new dramatic change of strategy was needed. International recognition of the “Algeria problem” had been the main target all along the line, still, the means through which that target would be attained had to be altered. To attract the attention of the world both inside and outside the country, the FLN had to turn “terrorist” by shifting, only two years after the outbreak of the war of independence (that is, in the summer of 1956), from the countryside to urban spaces and more specifically the wider area of Algiers. The idea was that the violence and the determination of the insurgents should become much more visible and palpable, while the wider layers of the Algerian population should be made to really feel the destruction by sensing the urgency of striking at the colonizers. In other words, the passive masses should learn that some change, rather than no change at all,
was in the offing, that real as well as meaningful violent action was possible provided that they were mobilized and taken out of their complacent attitude that only favored the colonizers. Simultaneously, the—so far—conventional military warfare had to be transformed into an unconventional, asymmetric, urban, hence terrorist one, insofar as it was the French-speaking colonists—the so-called pied noir—who were supposed to not just feel uncomfortable by the activities of the resisting forces but terrorized at the thought that their very physical safety was at serious risk.

From what one can gather from above, it was necessary to escalate the violence against the representatives of French imperialism not through an increase of the hits themselves but rather through the expansion of the scope of the terrorist activity to include surprise attacks against unsuspicous civilians and noncombatants in the capital. The war was suddenly converted from a strictly military activity to a symbolic and psychological game. Ramdane Abane, the leader of the FLN, had realized that for the violence to be effective it had to directly affect the lives of innocent, peace-loving people who were in no way related to the ruthlessness of the French military and the imperial institutions located in Algeria. Moreover, it had to attract the attention of the international community as well as appealing to the instincts and aesthetic of the public opinion, both home and abroad. Abane was once recorded asking the following rhetorical question: “Is it preferable for our cause to kill ten enemies in a dry river bed [in a remote location of the Algerian hinterland] when no one will talk of it or a single man in Algiers which will be noted the next day by the American press?” In a similar tone, Nelson Mandela intimated that for his own struggle in South Africa he had to take very seriously the advice that an Algerian “terrorist” had given to him, according to which “international opinion . . . is sometimes worth more than a fleet of jet fighters.” A terrorist outrage against a civilian will generate more horror than an open military conflict would to the extent that the latter is presumably based upon the, more or less, logical premise that in the theater of war there will inevitably be casualties and collateral damage. By contrast, in the case of terrorism there are no rules or logic and, therefore, the “theatrical stage” is not limited to distinct battlefields: all people are potential participants/victims. In addition, it is the randomness of terrorist strikes that assigns them their shocking quality.

What Abane is really talking about when he brings up the importance of the media in the question of terrorist tactics is the communicative and aesthetic value of a terrorist outrage. An act of violence is meaningless and futile unless there is someone
around to bear witness to it, communicate its atrociousness, and thereby affect emotionally the public opinion and the international community. What better way of showing the atrocity than acting it out in front of every citizen, in the center of the city and in broad daylight? The FLN broke new “terrorist ground” in the twentieth century when it decided to strike not military or nongovernmental buildings but rather bars and cafeterias frequented by carefree civilians, and more particularly, French-speaking colonists. Saadi Yacef, Abane’s military deputy, recruited three Muslim women with European looks who would hardly arouse any suspicion and gave them three bombs that they would have to detonate simultaneously in three different crowded areas of Algiers: a seaside bar packed with pied noir families, a café with University students, and the Air France passenger terminal. What is ironic is that the only target that seemed somehow relevant to the terrorists’ political agenda—the Air France terminal—was accidentally not hit (the bomb failed to go off). However, the two other attacks, aside from killing three people and injuring seriously fifty, created a lot of confusion, panic and terror amongst the, up-to-then unaccustomed to extreme violence, crowds.

By going from bombing inanimate targets with symbolic significance—government offices or military and police stations—to striking haphazardly at noncombatant civilians in Algiers downtown, the FLN achieved its purpose of shifting international attention to the revolutionary cause and producing second thoughts, among the French colonists, about the necessity of holding onto Algeria. In a way, the shift from nonlethal symbolic tactics to lethal “meaningless” ones (because what did the innocent have to do with military operations?) signified a shift from thought and intellect to nonthought and feeling. In other terms, and in accordance with terrorism’s basic premise that “there are no innocents,” the French-speaking community and the European colonists had to be dragged out of their cosmopolitan indifference by being forced to feel, rather than understand on an intellectual level, that they did not belong there. That feeling would be reinforced by an aesthetic of irrational terror and intensified by their uncertainty as to whether they were complicit or not in what was taking place in the country they had settled in.

Terrorism is also a vehicle of propaganda. Through the random attacks, the FLN hoped to create noise which other parties would be able to listen to. Therefore, the ostensibly erratic, irrational violence unleashed on unsuspecting citizens would hopefully imprint on the minds of the indigenous Muslim population that the FLN
was the true representative of the people and the only one capable of overthrowing the
domineering French colonizers. In addition, it was the guarantee that something was
finally about to change in the status quo after so many decades of suppression. In
essence, the more irrationally violent the insurgents got the more credible they
became to the eyes of the people and, as a consequence, the more supporters they
gained. In short, the terrorist hits constituted rhetorical instruments of persuasion. This
rhetoric deceived also the French into believing that there was a need to outbid the
revolutionary terror with even more terror on their part. Thus, extremist elements
related to the French occupying forces resorted to bombing the homes of alleged FLN
members, and later, when total chaos was wreaked upon the country through the
continuation of the FLN bloody operations—ranging from assassinating the mayor of
Algiers to bombing popular bars and sports stadiums—the authorities were left with
no option but to bring the army into the equation. The FLN had doubtless succeeded
in exposing the tyrannical face of the French Occupation, thereby leading many
moderate Muslims into their own radical arms. That was the beginning of the end of
the French occupation of Algeria.

Frantz Fanon, a fervent supporter of the Algerian revolution and an active
participant in it, discerned something noble in anti-colonial violence: the possibility of
inaugurating a cultural as well as international consciousness in the minds of the
formerly colonized:

> The nation is not only the condition of culture, its fruitfulness, its
continuous renewal, and its deepening. It is also a necessity. It is the
fight for national existence which sets culture moving and opens to it
the doors of creation. . . . The nation gathers together the various
indispensable elements necessary for the creation of a culture, those
elements which alone can give it credibility, validity, life, and creative
power. In the same way, it is its national character that will make such
a culture open to other cultures and which will enable it to influence
and permeate other cultures. A non-existent culture can hardly be
expected to have bearing on reality, or to influence reality. . . . We
believe that the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized
people to re-establish the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the
most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists.
For Fanon culture means life, therefore, anti-colonial violence that re-establishes the “sovereignty” of a nation is a “complete” “cultural manifestation” which is not only life-giving but also reality-conferring. If the extreme, indiscriminate violence and terror unleashed upon unsuspecting civilians qualify as “conscious and organized undertaking[s],” then the terrorist action undertaken by the FLN against not just the occupational forces but also the cultural products accompanying those forces may well qualify as action that restores a sense of national consciousness and an aesthetics of cultural identity—prerequisites of re-establishing connection with authentic reality. The very aesthetics of reality, that is, presupposes a cultural and national instinct which, however, stems necessarily from the liberation of individual imagination. This is why “on the eve of the decisive conflict for national freedom [one notices] the renewing of forms of expression and the rebirth of the imagination.”7 A very important remark that Fanon makes (which relates indirectly to unconventional, “terrorist” action as not just a cathartic factor but also one that will likely lead to the inculcation of a democratic consciousness) is that a national identity or culture opens itself freely to other cultures, thus creating a sense of belonging to a wider international and intercultural community within which it is capable of continually redefining, hence renewing itself.

Whether Fanon was able to persuasively theorize the potential improvement of society through revolution and terrorism, or not, is debatable. What he has definitely put his finger on, however, hinges upon the perils underlying terrorist, insurgent action when the latter stops being “terrorist” and becomes instead institutional and too conventionalized. As already noted in the previous chapter, history has demonstrated that a terrorist organization or revolutionary movement determined to rid a people from the yoke of a tyrannical regime usually has no coherent plan concerning its own future action when it finally takes over from the previous status quo. More particularly, the FLN, “which emerged from the war as the only possible Algerian ruling party, had learnt how to govern while waging a fantastically brutal campaign of terrorism. Coarsened by violence . . . weaned on extremism, antagonistic toward the concepts of tolerance, compromise, and the rule of law. . . . The use of terrorism is indeed poor preparation for effective, democratic governance.”8 As is well-known, during the French occupation, Arabic, as a formal language of instruction, was forbidden. What happened after 1962 was that the new FLN nationalist government established Arabic as the only permissible language, thereby encouraging an
education and culture that would be based upon Islam. It would simply, that is, reverse the status quo. For the next thirty years, the FLN as a socialist political party and the sole legal one (up until 1989 when other parties were rendered legal after the Algerian Constitution was amended to allow for the existence of other parties as well as the possibility of democracy) would ironically rule Algeria almost with an iron fist and without attending to the need for political reform to ameliorate the lives of the Algerian people for whom it had struggled for so long. As a result, there were massive demonstrations that favored the rise of Islamist powers such the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF). Stunningly, what the formerly revolutionary FLN government did when the ISF appeared to be winning a general election in 1992 was to encourage a military coup that would dismantle the organization and banish its members. Eventually, the entire ISF party was officially banned and a civil war that would last for years began between the government and all those Islamist forces whose electoral victory had been denied.

What the events, above, show is that a radical as well as revolutionary organization can easily turn into a non-radical, conservative as well as intolerant regime as soon as its authority is questioned. In the case of Algeria, postcolonial critic and theorist Edward Said tells us that at the time of the insurrection the national consciousness embodied by the FLN’s anti-colonial struggle was unfortunately not transformed into a social consciousness which would transcend the very logic of the antithesis between “colonial/anti-colonial,” thus turning Algeria into a true, postcolonial state. Said takes the two terms—national consciousness, social consciousness—from Fanon’s own book in which Fanon had foreseen such a turn of events in Algeria. Said eloquently explains how an anti-state terrorist force tends to mimic its former enemy’s tactic and logic:

The FLN . . . proceeded politically to absorb the whole of Algerian civil society: within three decades this alignment of state and party authority with a restored identity caused not only the monopolization of most political practices by one party and the almost complete erosion of democratic life, but, on the right wing, the challenging appearance of an Islamic opposition, favoring a militantly Muslim Algerian identity based on Koranic (Shari’ah) principles. By the 1990s the country was in a state of crisis, whose result has been a deeply impoverishing face-off between government . . . and the Islamic
movement, which appeals to the past and orthodoxy for its authority. Both sides claim the right to rule Algeria. What both Fanon and Said allude to is the trap which revolutionary and anti-colonial terrorist groups have frequently fallen into, insofar as through their actions and mentality they end up causing an extension of imperialism in their very attempt to simply counter imperialist ideologies and policies.

3.2 International attraction to terrorism: Palestinian novelty and modern technologies

The Algerian war of Independence and the terrorist campaigns launched by revolutionary and other insurgent groups inside the country (or outside it) managed to attract attention to anti-colonialism and imperialist politics and, most importantly, influence future radical liberationist organizations. The FLN’s tactics did indeed grab headlines while foreshadowing the onset of a new wave of terrorism of a much more “international” and modernized character. It was in the late 1960s that this new kind of extreme violence made its appearance. On 22 July 1968, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a branch of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), took over an aircraft belonging to EL AL, Israel’s national airline, and diverted it to Algiers. The plane was full of unsuspecting passengers going from Rome to Tel Aviv. Undoubtedly there was a felicitous symbolism in the very choice of the city the aircraft would be diverted to—the Algerian capital—as if the hijackers had wanted to make the point that their own mission or struggle would have to be just as successful as the Algerians’ war of liberation from French colonialism. The aim of the hijackers was not to harm any of the passengers but rather to exert political pressure upon Israel so that it would be forced to release sixteen members of the PFLP who remained in captivity. After many days of negotiations the hijackers finally achieved their target and the hostages were traded for the captured fighters (or terrorists).

Of course, the PLO was not always carrying out attacks against civilian targets. When it was first set up in 1964, it concentrated on strikes against the Israeli military infrastructure. Its declared purpose was to destroy the state of Israel, create a
Palestinian state and restore to it all the territory Palestinians had lost after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. However, after the Six-Day War in 1967, which was also won by the Israelis, it became absolutely clear that Israel had not only occupied more (Palestinian) land but established settlements on it too. Israel, in other words, was there to stay on a more permanent basis. After 1967, that is, it was resolved by the PLO (and Yasser Arafat, the real leader of Palestinians) that “[a]rmed resistance from within and beyond the Occupied Territories [should become] the basis for the construction of Palestinian national identity. . . .” “Armed resistance from within and beyond the Occupied Territories,” in essence, meant unleashing terrorist violence not only on a military level but also on a nonmilitary one. It also meant that Palestinian fighters would not restrict themselves to inflicting pain upon combatants and soldiers but they were willing to go out of their way to terrorize (without necessarily killing) civilian noncombatants.

After the Six-Day War therefore, attacks would be launched against targets that were seemingly irrelevant to the Palestinian cause, barely having anything to do with their enemy, Israel, and far away from the usual theater of operations. It was in such a context that the aforementioned hijacking incident took place, ushering in the new international era of terrorism focusing on the importance of publicity for furthering terrorist agendas. George Habash, leader of the PFLP and an advocate for airliner hijackings, declared openly in a 1970 interview that when “we hijack a plane it has more effect than if we killed a hundred Israelis in battle. For decades world opinion has been neither for nor against the Palestinians. It simply ignored us. At least the world is talking about us now.” Hijackings had occurred before this EL AL incident, however, the specific act was the first one to constitute a dramatic political statement. The choice of the aircraft was not random—it was the national air carrier of the Occupying Forces—while the emergency it created forced Israel to come in direct contact with people whom the Jewish state itself had only been characterizing as “terrorists.” The very contact with them, therefore, was an indirect recognition of their political existence.

Despite the tactical victory won by the terrorists through their de facto recognition, there are several other important factors that one should consider. As we have already emphasized, terrorism generally is about inculcating fear and terror in the human mind. The purpose of a terrorist act is to shock and stun an “audience”—specific layers of society, or even an entire country. The EL AL hijacking managed
precisely to do that: it stunned not just the Israeli authorities but the entire Israeli society. Hijacking a civilian aircraft was obviously a stepping up of the campaign against Israel. It was the first time that terrorists thought about exploiting state-of-the-art modern technology—the airplane—by turning it into a means of putting pressure upon their adversary. In addition, it was the first time that terrorists had decided to internationalize their cause by involving somehow other countries—as mentioned above, the plane had taken off from Italy—as well as foreign nationals that were presumably unrelated to the Palestinians’ “oppressors.” The further development of commercial aviation and mass air transportation encouraged people to fly in masses to different international destinations for business or pleasure, while the new tactical change—hijacking—tapped into the new habit of air travel, thus turning terrorism from a provincial to an almost cosmopolitan phenomenon. At the same time, taking over planes and keeping passengers as hostages cast a shadow upon air travel as a totally safe means of transportation and created unease in the minds and hearts of civilians and travelers as to the probable growth of the problem in the immediate future.

Habash, leader of the PFLP, uses words that encapsulate the renewed objectives of the terrorists: “world opinion,” “effect,” “talking.” He supports the view that the world does not need to be in favor of or against Palestinians. Rather, the world needs to not be ignorant, it has to know and talk about the problem of the injustice done to them, regardless of whether it supports it or not. Therefore, hijacking international flights forces the innocent to listen to what the hijackers have to say and reflect on the supposed urgency of their concerns. In a way, through compelling the people to feel the problem, the hijackers aspire to render them more ethically involved in the question of injustice. But since we have already underscored that the main aim of a terrorist is to attract the attention of those that are not directly affected by the terrorist act, the passengers of an aircraft are not the main “target group” of the hijackers. The latter are rather interested in making others—Israelis as well as non-Israelis and distant spectators—empathize with those that are immediately implicated in terrorist violence (that is, the passengers), which should potentially lead those others to try and resolve the situation that will certainly have sparked general outrage in the meantime. The aesthetic of pain, that is, seems to be built into the mechanism of psychological coercion activated by the threat of death.
After the EL AL incident, hijackings became quite fashionable in terrorist circles. The problem of “bad publicity” was not a real problem as long as it kept the Palestinian question a hot issue—bad publicity was, in fact, good publicity. Thus, before the decade drew to its close, there were more hijacking incidents that indicated the zeal of the perpetrators to outbid the determination shown in previous cases of air piracy as well as stepping up the campaign against the Israeli occupation. On December 26, 1968, PFLP terrorists stormed an EL AL aircraft just before take off from the international airport in Athens, Greece. The terrorists’ aim was to kill as many Jews as possible en route from Tel Aviv to New York, and to achieve that they fired at the jet with a machine gun for more than a minute. This was no bloodless attack: one man was killed and two more were seriously injured. In August 1969 the PFLP hijacked a TWA flight that had taken off from Rome and diverted it to Damascus, Syria. Their intention was not to harm any passengers but to send the message that the US was unethically protecting the Israeli interests against Palestine. Soon after evacuating the plane, the terrorists blew it up. Television, which was gradually but steadily becoming the most popular medium at the time, transmitted extraordinary images from the destruction and captivated spectators’ interest around the world. Seeing that the international media might unknowingly contribute immensely to the advertizing of their cause, the Popular Front took to hijacking four other transatlantic flights in September 1970. Three of the planes landed in the desert of Jordan and the fourth in Cairo where it was destroyed, while more than six hundred passengers were held for nearly three weeks. This was just one out of twenty-nine hijackings attempted or carried out successfully by various Palestinian factions from 1968 to 1977, which proves the massive dimensions to which the problem had grown.

The problem of Palestinian terror was now everybody’s problem. A terrorist campaign is “like a shark in the water: it must keep moving forward—no matter how slowly or incrementally—or die,” argues Bruce Hoffman. The Palestinians realized that carrying out guerilla attacks on the Gaza strip had not brought about satisfactory results—such as persuading Israel to change its policy in the area, for instance—and that people around the world had grown tired of hearing about localized military operations conducted by one ethnic minority against another. Consequently, they had to somehow step up the campaign in order to re-sensitize the international community and attract more publicity to their activities. The only way to do that was by relinquishing their typical methodology of harming their enemy
physically, and adopting unexpected and unconventional methods of doing harm: hijacking planes was obviously such a “stepping up” of the campaign which would apparently reawaken people’s consciences as to the fairness of the Palestinian goals. In order to refocus attention to themselves, that is, terrorists, often reluctantly, resorted to more dramatic and highly theatrical acts that they would not have opted for under different circumstances. In a way, the demand for creativity and inventiveness does fall upon the shoulders of terrorist groups insofar as they have to always come up with novel initiatives or even tricks to sustain the interest of the public and, by extension, the media.

The method of hostage taking, chosen during the hijacking incidents mentioned above, is a bloodless kind of violence that terrorists employ so as to exert psychological pressure upon governments and authorities rather than physical pressure upon hostages. This is a situation where the threat of death (rather than actual death) hovers over those captured. Hostage taking has been called “smart” terrorism because the terrorists involved maintain control over the situation, gain media attention for their cause over a sustained period of time, and force governments to recognize them in the course of any negotiations to free the hostages. In effect, the leadership of the terrorist group taking the hostages becomes the puppet master, pulling the strings . . . of the government whose people are taken hostage. The aims of the terrorist organization are to gain maximum press and television coverage for their cause and themselves and to increase their bargaining power for the next round.16

“Smart” terrorism, in other terms, involves theatrical ploys, bluffs, and puppeteers putting on terrorist shows and pulling strings before an ever increasing body of TV spectators eager to watch sensational images from around the world.

In the late 60s and early 70s, the significance of television not just for informing the masses but also shaping their worldviews was unquestionable. Terrorist organizations realized early enough the ability of the TV to publicize a problem or an occurrence of violence, at times, creating an aesthetic view of it through the transformation of the violent act into a dramatic performance. History has shown that terrorism feeds upon the media in the same way that the media frequently depend upon terrorist acts to increase their ratings. As we have already argued, terrorists
depend upon the visual images of the terror that they provoke. Publicity is terrorists’ “life blood and their oxygen. No other medium has provided more oxygen to terrorism than television because of its ability to report the news instantly, nonstop, and in visuals and words from any place to all parts of the globe, a facility that has affected the reporting patterns of other media as well.”

Actually, the relationship between terrorism and the TV became much closer, even symbiotic, during the 1980s and afterwards. A prominent example is a 1985 hijacking of a TWA flight in Beirut virtually staged for the camera. During the unfolding of the crisis, it turned out that the perpetrators were fully aware of “the geographic reach of the American media, the audience size of different media types, the working of press pools, and the advantages of scheduling live interviews during TV networks’ popular morning and early evening news broadcasts.”

It seems extraordinary but true: hijackings were staged or choreographed for television audiences. They were elevated to aesthetic products to be consumed by hungry consumers as well as media obsessing with violence.

In the case of the Palestinian struggle, the dramatic escalation of violence (to include innocent civilians from other countries) was symptomatic of a “bidding war” amongst rival Palestinian factions fighting for their own survival as radical organizations. What this means is that once terrorist violence or the threat of it escalated there was no going back. The expectations of the viewing public, both eyewitnesses and TV viewers, would have to be met. Suddenly it becomes obvious that ideology and politics yield to a strange game of internal competition over which a faction can mount a performance to outbid a previous one. Peter Neumann elucidates this almost unconscious procedure very eloquently:

The result of outbidding will be a spiral of violence in which different groups feel compelled to engage in evermore spectacular acts of violence in order to “top” their rivals’ latest attacks. Organizations which had previously refrained from deliberate attacks against civilians may be drawn into mass-casualty attacks simply in order to prove that they are capable of inflicting as much damage as their rivals. . . .

Furthermore, once the “bidding war” is over, it will become more difficult to reduce the violence to a more “acceptable” level. The population will have become desensitized, and the expectation of what constitutes “terror” in the eyes of the target audience will have shifted.
to a higher level. The result is an increased overall threshold of terror which any subsequent terrorist attacks will need to overcome. . . .

There is no turning back from violence once it is resorted to, and that is not because de-escalation is not feasible but because no subsequent terrorist act, symbolic or otherwise, would be just as mind-boggling and shocking unless it was just as loud and terrifying as the previous one. It is consequently a question of rhetorical persuasion and performance: a question of which party can demonstrate a rhetorical ability in sending a loud and clear message to the other parties as well as the wider public.

The appearance of Black September, a new terrorist group sponsored by Arafat, was the outcome of the “rhetorical” war between moderate and hard-line guerillas in Palestine. Black September perpetrated what was seen as perhaps the most shocking terrorist attack in history before the September 11 terrorist outrage in New York: the killing of two members of the Israeli Olympic team and the capturing of nine more athletes (who later died too) after a raid on the Olympic village during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Germany. The hit was impressive and unprecedented insofar as it occurred in the context of the most important international sports event, which was also widely televised. More than 800 million spectators witnessed the attack live and learned of the terrorists’ political goals regarding the PLO’s fight against the Israeli occupation. But most importantly, those spectators—mainly Western viewers who, up to then, had had no previous visual (or other) experience of Palestinian terrorism—were taking an imaginary (but just as traumatic) plunge into the physical and psychological ordeal caused by the experience of what looked like an irrational act of extreme violence.

Irrational or not, the act itself had no precedent in the sense that it was no mere hostage situation given that the terrorists had not precluded the possibility of taking innocent lives. In fact, they had given serious consideration to such an option. As one of the members of Black September said, “We have to kill their most important and most famous people. . . . [W]e have to kill artists and sportsmen.”20 Real death for noncombatants on foreign soil had just entered the picture for the first time in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What is more, what was required was the actual death of famous people who were completely extraneous to governmental affairs and the political arena. Sportsmen and artists typically represent the world of entertainment and recreation and a terrorist note which was left behind by the organization was precisely establishing a link between the public’s entertainment and its indifference to
real tragedy and sufferance: “We are neither killers nor bandits. . . . We are persecuted people who have no land and no homeland. . . . We are not against any people, but why should our place here be taken by the flag of the occupiers. . . . [W]hy should the whole world be having fun and entertainment while we suffer with all ears deaf to us?” The idea expressed here is that had the world not been so consumed by material pleasures and joyful activities it would have been able to feel the injustice done to the Palestinians. A second reading might perhaps interpret the reference to the “fun” the world was allegedly having as some sort of envy that people, including their own “oppressor”—Israel—were capable of entertaining themselves, whereas all Palestinians could do was suffer: why “should our place here be taken by the flag of the occupiers”? A 2005 novel entitled The Attack, written by Palestinian author Yasmina Khadra, addresses similar issues that relate to the total disjunction between revolutionary/sacrificial death and laid-back, complacent life style. The novel is about Amin, a middle-class Arab-Israeli surgeon who enjoys a successful career in Tel Aviv, and who is shocked by the news of the death of his wife. What completely devastates him though is that his wife died while on a suicide bombing mission. His desperate attempts to discover why she was caught up in the web of terrorism lead him to question his own convenient middle-class (a)political apathy which had blinded him to the real day-to-day tragedy experienced by his fellow Palestinians. In essence, he discovers that it is precisely his own pleasurable indifference to ethnic injustice and the plight of Palestine which works against the liberation of his homeland. The real enemy is himself, not the Israelis.

Back into the “real” world and the Munich attack, taking the lives of the famous and/or harming those wallowing in insouciance would not just attract the attention of the whole world; it would actually horrify spectators into thinking that if the cream of the crop of a country cannot protect themselves against terrorist violence despite all the means available to them, why would anonymous people be any less vulnerable to such violence? Or even, should they (the “common” people) be involved in a terrorist incident, would they be treated as real human beings worthy of all the attention they could get or simply as unnecessary but, somehow, “acceptable” casualties? In other words, in spite of the physical distance between the events and the persons viewing them, an overwhelming feeling of helplessness—similar to the sense of sublime awe—would go over the remote spectators standing speechless before
their TV sets. All of a sudden, death felt, at the same time, distant and in close proximity, visual but also real.

As we have already emphasized in the introduction, aesthetics is bound up with the terrorist deed and its reception. Particularly the feeling of the sublime referred to above is a highly aesthetic one, not necessarily in terms of an appreciation of the beautiful (since it is rather callous to refer to a visually compelling image of terror as a “beautiful” one), but in terms of the feeling of relief unconsciously experienced by a distanced spectator at the sight of an episode of extreme violence. The spectator is relieved that she is not the one who is physically affected; rather, someone else is. Back in eighteenth-century England, it was Edmund Burke who elaborated upon the nature of the sublime as relief:

[T]here is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight. This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. . . . [T]he pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer.23

Burke is virtually telling us that people derive an unconscious pleasure from other people’s calamities. However, such a pleasure is always combined with a more natural feeling of pain (we also claim to have) at seeing other people suffer. This mixed feeling creates an uneasiness that can only be dissolved by expressing words of comfort for the others’ ordeals. Burke talks about how the condition of sublimity presupposes that one “flirts” with the terror of death on an imaginary, fictional way, without actually coming into direct contact with death. Such a condition is one of a “delightful horror”:

[If the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person . . . they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. Its highest degree I call astonishment.24

Keeping in mind Burke’s notion of sublimity as a kind of “safe” (because remote) astonishment, we might think of the TV witnesses of the terrorist attack in the
Olympic village as experiencing in astonishment the very feeling of the sublime as a horror which was also tinged with a puzzling sense of awe and attraction to the shocking scene at hand. But what about the terrorists themselves who had broken into the world of “fun and entertainment” as they called the Summer Olympics? In some perverse fashion, by storming the Olympic village the Palestinian terrorists became active participants in the scene of entertainment they had set themselves against.

In the years to come, Black September would raise the bar for terror by launching campaigns that involved the indiscriminate killing of foreign citizens in strategic or not positions. Taking over embassies (such as the Saudi Arabian one in 1974, for instance) and executing diplomats would send multiple messages of ambivalence to a variety of addressees. The content of those messages (namely, the real intentions behind the future attacks) would purposefully have been hard to discern. As Fatah leader Salah Khalef explained, “we are planting the seed. Others will harvest it. . . .” The metaphorical, almost literary language used by Khalef speaks the truth in forthright manner. It is not their duty to render their messages comprehensible; it does not befall the perpetrators to determine their content. The receivers of the messages will have to interpret them or attach meaning to them. What the terrorists do is simply spread around signifiers without specific signifieds. To put it differently, they deliberately sow chaos but they will not be around to reap its blowback.

The rationale (or rather, “irrationale”) behind such an attitude takes us back to the dogma of “propaganda of the deed,” which posits that we should not first theorize insurgency and its supposed legitimacy and then put it into practice through actual deeds of violence that prove the plausibility of theory. It is rather the opposite: one acts in a certain violent way, and only retrospectively is the act made comprehensible via linguistic articulations. Simply put, words do not mean; it is action which not only speaks louder than words but also constitutes the potential meaning of any supporting linguistic entity thereafter. There is a fascinating aesthetic paradox here. The terrorist, or freedom fighter, employs a metaphorical language to underscore the renunciation of language and metaphor and the prioritization of violence as a palpable message in itself. This paradox is aesthetic to the extent that it restores, at least in theory, the core element of aesthetics—aesthesis—to the very narrative of terrorist violence by ironically literalizing the metaphoric utterance of the terrorist. All of a sudden, words are not empty any more, while actions are meaningful by themselves. On second
thought, the disruption, rather than destruction, of the daily routine of civilians by the enemy-state may qualify as some kind of “rational” or meaningful action that can be legitimately articulated: “It is enough for us now to learn, for example, in reading the Jerusalem Post, that Mrs. Meir had to make her will before visiting Paris, or that Mr. Abba Eban had to travel with a false passport.”

Exactly how disruptive such action proves is a matter upon which every-day life practices will decide.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the propaganda of the deed—translated as exercising a violent transgression rather than dwelling for too long on the possibility of a harmonious co-existence between two communities—practically legitimized, at a certain level, the struggle of the Palestinians and broached the question of the future establishment of a Palestinian state. Such violent transgressions as the aforementioned hijackings or the bloodshed in the Olympic Village in Munich may not be deemed to have been absolute strategic successes, but they certainly forced the international community as well as all related parts to start thinking seriously about the problem of Palestine. Terrorist violence, in all its fearsome unexpectedness and political aspiration, managed to put its point across and bring back on the table problematic issues that were not even seen as such (as “problematic,” that is) before the exercise of violence:

Despite the human cost, over the next two decades the terrible price in lives and fear was in large part responsible for the political change which described the “Palestinian situation” and then the “Palestinian question” and the “Palestinian problem.” Western leaders, the Israelis, and the Arab states developed a much greater interest in providing a solution . . . because the Palestinians made it ever more costly for all parties to continue to ignore them.

In a communiqué that appeared in a Beirut newspaper a few days after the dramatic attack, the terrorists extolled their achievement as a product of communicational brilliance: “A bomb in the White House . . . an earthquake in Paris could not have echoed through the consciousness of every man in the world like the operation at Munich. . . . The choice of the Olympics, from the purely propagandistic view-point . . . was like painting the name of Palestine on a mountain . . . seen from the four corners of the earth.”

Whether or not the terrorists portray themselves as artists or painters painting the name and the future of Palestine on a mountain, we should not be led to believe
that violence naturally rights a wrong or that indiscriminate terrorist action is justified and necessary because it allegedly forces one to listen to and understand the plight of the oppressed (or, from the point-of-view of Israel, the duty of a people to resist terrorist destruction). One could argue that trying to really comprehend state terror—in this case, Israel’s violent reaction to Palestinian attacks—or anti-state one—Palestinian terrorism—leads one to directly fall into the unethical trap of rationalizing and eventually legitimizing violence and terror. The act of killing should always remain irrational and incomprehensible, impervious to any kind of reduction to socio-economic analyses and elaborations. Slavoj Zizek elucidates the imperative of irrationality:

In Palestine today, there are two opposing narratives with absolutely no common horizon, no “synthesis” in a wider metanarrative; thus the solution cannot be found in any all-encompassing narrative. This also means that when we consider this conflict we should stick to cold, ruthless standards, suspending the urge to try to “understand” the situation: we should unconditionally resist the temptation to “understand” Arab anti-Semitism (where we really encounter it) as a “natural” reaction to the sad plight of the Palestinians; or to “understand” the Israeli measures as a “natural” reaction against the background of the memory of the Holocaust.29

Zizek contends that sheer acts of brutal violence should be taken out of their supposed social or historical context in order to be judged more “objectively” for what they truly are: brutal acts for which there is no ethical justification, and which should therefore be unconditionally condemned. Of course, there always lurks in such a thought the danger of presenting oppositional narratives and practices of violence as exactly “equal” or identical to each other—which, in many cases, may be wrong and unjust to both narratives. Still, Zizek is right to emphasize the significance of the principle of irrationality when grappling with single outbursts of violence coming from either side. Unless we view each outburst as an irrational singularity, we cannot help but normalize within us the image of bloody conflict as a familiar, hence sadly acceptable motif, particularly by setting that image against a larger backdrop of war and atrocity.
3.3 Attractive terrorists: the feminine and the explosive

As we have emphasized so far, the aesthetic has been important not only to the representation of terrorism but also to the self-fashioning of terrorists. In some cases, aesthetic factors play key roles in the very fulfillment of their political aims. The aesthetics of feminine beauty, for instance, has occasionally affected terrorist strategies and methodologies. We have already seen how the Algerian revolutionary movement employed women to carry out attacks against the French, as it had realized that a female presence could much more easily go unnoticed amidst the unsuspicious crowd. But the image of the beautiful terrorist extends well beyond practical issues of operation and terrorist implementation. At times, an aesthetically appealing female figure serves to construct a much more humane and socially acceptable “face” for a terrorist organization to which that figure belongs. Or, more seriously, it serves to disseminate through its media representations a visually attractive, hence ethically flawless image of terrorist practice. Beauty may serve the aim of mystifying, or celebrating, the figure of the terrorist at large as well as her (or his) political objectives: if the terrorist is a beautiful woman, one might sense that her political objective is just as beautiful and legitimate, while her tactics are acceptable and understandable.

One of the persons involved in the famous 1969 hijacking incident described earlier was Leila Khaled, a charming member of the PFLP and a staunch supporter of the organization’s ideology and practices. Khaled might indeed be seen as the first case of “celebrity terrorism” in recent history. She quickly became an iconic figure and an embodiment of Leftist revolution around the world. Posters of her holding an AK-47 and smiling helped disseminate the image of a dangerous femme fatale with a terrifying, yet noble, agenda. You didn’t have to be an advocate of terrorism to be attracted to the idea that someone could be both beautiful and “deadly” at the same time. As a European journalist put it, female terrorists, “from Palestinian Leila Khaled to German Ulrike Meinhof [a leading figure of the Red Army Faction operating in West Germany], have long fascinated the popular imagination with their frequent combination of feminine charms and ability to kill in cold blood.” Khaled was described as a “trim and dark-eyed beauty with sex appeal. Even three decades after Khaled’s involvement in terrorism, reporters dwelled on the attention she received as the first female hijacker because of her ‘beauty,’ her ‘pin-up’ looks, and her ‘delicate
Audrey Hepburn face.’” Others called her “the glamour girl of international terrorism” or “the hijack queen.”

What added to Khaled’s popularity was the fact that she was not implicated in any lethal PFLP bombing activity, nor was she involved in any targeted or indiscriminate killing. On the contrary, during the hijacking incidents she was extremely friendly towards the passengers albeit crystal clear about her serious intentions. Evidently, people around the world became fascinated with the beautiful young woman who had taken up arms without paradoxically renouncing her feminine and womanly looks or exhibiting a more “manly” or robust kind of attitude. To the European eyes, she seemed like an extraordinary woman with an unconventional professional career. For a long period, the media obsessed over Khaled, which is “testimony to the powerful magnetic attraction exercised by terrorists and terrorism... in even the most unlikely (and absurd) circumstances.” Bruce Hoffman reminds us that on 3 September 1997, in the immediate aftermath of Princess Diana’s death, the London Times published on two consecutive days an article describing how Khaled was allegedly “touched” by the princess’s tragic loss, thus writing a poem dedicated to her, which she subsequently sent to the princess’s two sons. Indeed, it sounds absurd to conflate two personalities that are famous for completely different reasons: on the one hand, Diana, associated with mitigating the pain of the weak and innocent, while on the other, Leila, the notorious hijacker who unhesitatingly jeopardized the lives of hundreds of innocent passengers to attract international attention to the Palestinian struggle. Obviously, the role of the media, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, is highly suspect when it comes to the question of how they cover or comment upon events or figures of positive or negative resonance. It’s safe to say that television and the press have traditionally succumbed to the aesthetic power and sex appeal of femininity (and masculinity) regardless of whether that femininity carried positive or negative (ethical or immoral) overtones.

Female terrorists like Leila Khaled or Ulrike Meinhof, from the Marxist RAF organization, shrank from renouncing their femininity and sex appeal. Far from revising traditional gender roles,

[they] have played these same roles with greater fervor but in a different direction. Rather than being liberated from traditional sex roles, female terrorists replace the restrictions of marriage with extreme attachment to a leader or a cause. . . . [T]hey are burdened
with passionate concern for society at large. Female terrorists may be even more fanatic than males. In negating conventional roles, they turn their traditional roles against themselves.\textsuperscript{36}

From the excerpt above one gathers that female terrorists, by underscoring their femininity and aesthetic dimension, paradoxically managed to reinforce their revolutionary dynamic—beauty at the service of the revolution. In Leila Khaled’s case, however, such a dynamic did not seem to be too dangerous or life-threatening in the eyes of distant viewers who had chosen to see Khaled as a beautiful rebel rather than a ruthless terrorist. If terrorism is \textit{terrifying} by definition, then depriving it of the element of terror-inducing death (or the threat of an imminent death) inevitably transforms terrorism into an innocuous \textit{sublime} performance, in Kant’s or Burke’s sense; a performance or image that appeals to spectators’ unconscious thoughts and fantasies concerning evil and the fascination the latter exerts on the mind.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{center}

\textit{Dr Mohammad al-Fadel, the attorney and future rector of Damascus University, with Leila Khaled.\url{http://www.syrianhistory.com/content/dr-mohammad-al-fadel-attorney-and-future-rector-damascus-university-leila-khaled-member-}}

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3.4 From the Weathermen to the Red Army Faction: democracy, boredom, and the call for action

In the 1970s and 1980s, Western publics had nearly identified terrorism with Marxist and Leftist organizations like the Weathermen in the USA, the Red Army Faction in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy. Such groups were usually committed to universalist ideologies, as contrasted to the particularist ideologies espoused by ethnic/separatist or religious movements. Unlike particularist terrorist groups that “divide people according to whether they share the same ethnicity, belief or birthplace,” universalist groups prioritize universalist notions such as equality for all and questions of human value, dignity or human rights. This section deals with the universalism of the Weathermen and the Red Army Faction (RAF), and more specifically with their call for a shift from bourgeoisie apathy to the awakening of the political consciousness of the citizen in Western democracies. That call, in fact, constituted a demand not only for an actual political revolution—besides, Western democracies were supposedly already “democratic” in principle, an opinion that naturally was not shared by the majority of terrorist organizations—but also an aesthetic one. The individual, according to revolutionary ideology, needed to re-establish contact with the very feeling or aesthesis of democratic freedom by rendering notions such as dignity, personal instinct, equality of the sexes, etc., more meaningful and less theoretical or abstract.

The call for restoring deep meaning to empty notions amounted to a demand for turning words into action which people could really engage in, feel to their very bones, and understand emotionally rather than intellectually. Deeds should speak now louder than ever in order to awaken the subjects from their decades-long apolitical and anti-social sleep. We need to state, at this point, that such Leftist movements as the Weathermen or RAF did not just spring out of nowhere, nor were they impervious to major influences from nationalist or ethnic revolutionaries of the past. As is well-known, for instance, members of the Red Army Faction were actually trained in PLO paramilitary camps in Jordan in 1969, which shows that terrorist organizations
operating in Western democracies admired and imitated particularist militant insurgents of the Middle East, to the point of copying their methods. This propensity for imitation constitutes the so-called “contagion effect,” the notion that terrorists watch and learn from each other’s doings, successes and failures. So RAF, for example, is to a great extent indebted to the PLO for its own doings as well as the theoretical justifications that shored up those doings.

At the end of the 1960s, a new kind of propaganda by deed and word (or frequently, first word and then deed) emerged, this time in the USA. On 7 October 1969 a bomb explosion shattered a police monument in Chicago. A radical group called the “Weathermen” assumed responsibility for the attack and justified it through the circulation of leaflets explaining the purpose of the act:

We move with the people of the world to seize power from those who now rule. We . . . expect the pig lackeys to come down on us. We’ve got to be ready for that. This is a war we can’t resist. We’ve got to actively fight. We’re going to bring the war home to the mother country of imperialism. AMERIKA: THE FINAL FRONT.39

Bringing the war “home” meant exposing violently the average citizen of America to the atrocities of the U.S. in Vietnam, a country that was thousands of miles away. It also entailed that the radicals believed that either Americans had no idea about what had been going on in Vietnam or they simply did not care. The only way, then, to “force” them to care was through making them feel the pain not just of the Vietnamese but of all the peoples that had to suffer the American imperialist politics. The sensational tinge of the declaration (“AMERIKA: THE FINAL FRONT”) alongside its threatening aspects—the reference to an imminent war on American territory—was, paradoxically, even more shocking to middle-class America than the violent act itself. Later on, a bombing of the headquarters of the New York City Police was accompanied by the issuing of a communiqué, published by the so-called Weather Report (the “official” newspaper of the radical group), which virtually claimed responsibility for the attack: “The time is now. Political power grows out of a gun, a Molotov, a riot, a commune and from the soul of the people.”40 During a four-day period, recorded in history as the “Days of Rage,” there was a lot of fighting in the streets, smashing shop windows and setting vehicles on fire. The injunction not only to speak openly against the state but also act violently against it was probably without precedent in the recent history of the U.S., mainly because such incendiary
messages were coming not from the “underdogs” of society but from educated middle-class kids who had turned, almost overnight, from theoretical insurgents to real practitioners of violence. So the question is,

why did radical organizations turn to violence at all in a democratic, wealthy, and highly educated society? Moreover, why were the privileged children of middle and upper class families in the forefront of this violence? This was an era of transitions, and its cultural, social, and political ferment crystallized in what came to be known as the New Left.41

It had all then started in the early 1960s with the emergence of the New Left. Members of the New Left included young students and intellectuals loosely connected with American universities. One of the aims of the New Left was to wage war against the “imperialism” of the U.S. as well as racial discrimination, economic injustice and sexual oppression—allegedly endemic phenomena in the country. In essence, their enemy was America itself. Despite being radical, the New Left did not seek the fulfillment of its goals by resorting to violence. Neither was its main offspring, SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), particularly comfortable with the exercise of violence despite its activist character. On the contrary, SDS wanted to influence or transform American politics peacefully, by means of controlling, legally, the Democratic Party. Thus, it denounced extreme-left as well as extreme-right policies and ideologies, but still saw Marx with a sympathetic eye. Its constitution declared that SDS would be an organization of democrats, absolutely opposed to totalitarian principles and ideas, and very serious about the possibility of establishing a participatory democracy in America. SDS advocates were especially repulsed by the philosophy of violence “because it requires generally the transformation of . . . a human being or a community of people into a depersonalized object of hate.”42 An ethics/politics of nonviolence, therefore, was integral to the program of the student organization.

How then did we go from the philosophy of nonviolence to the complete espousal of violence and terrorism not as a necessary evil but rather a prerequisite of reforming and improving the society? How did we get from SDS to the Weathermen and subsequently to the latter’s final “mutation,” the “Weather Underground”? The Weathermen organization was the radical arm of SDS, but how did a radical branch even become part of a moderate student movement? In order for a small part of a
movement to radicalize itself, there has to already be some radicality in the very rhetoric and language employed by the “mother movement” itself. Already in 1963, “the young theoreticians of the New Left [and the SDS] started to refer to their activities as ‘insurgent politics’ . . . and to see ‘participatory democracy’ as an alternative type of democracy, thereby rejecting party and interest group politics.”

The outbreak of the Vietnam War and the frustration of student hopes (that there could be a peaceful and gradual development of society from more conservative and oppressive to more democratic and progressive) on the one hand, and on the other, the realization that protest marches and other lawful demonstrations of resistance did not make any real difference in how American politics was conducted led to the radicalization of a small section of SDS—what would be called the “Weathermen”—which embraced principles that were opposed to the ones embraced by its predecessor. If SDS supported the avoidance of violence as it led to dehumanization, the Weathermen adopted a “fight fire with fire” mentality by supporting the idea that you can only respond with violence to the violence of the state, and in addition, that in the dehumanizing context of contemporary America you cannot but turn, willfully, into a dehumanized as well as dehumanizing being, thus turning the tables on the system. The delegitimation of the system and the ruling regime in the case at hand started as a form of linguistic and symbolic debasement. The repressive “other,” that is, is no longer portrayed in human terms—the opponents are no longer human subjects or individuals—but in subhuman ones—they become objects, “pigs” or “lackeys” which might potentially be more easily terrorized or exterminated.

When the “Weather People” finally adopted a dehumanizing philosophy emanating from the concept of “barbarism,” they were suddenly just a small step away from consciously embracing terrorism. Bernardine Dohrn, one of the fiercest leaders of the group, touched upon the question of the applicability of a future revolution: white middle-class youths apparently took no risks in their lives and that had to change dramatically and spectacularly, otherwise no revolutionary change could be feasible or viable. Radicals were just beginning to spell the word “terrorism” in awe as well as sublime anticipation. This development was not a clear case of “propaganda of the deed”; it was words and insurgent rhetoric that subsequently led to taking up arms, not the other way round. If words turned fiery, so would the concomitant practices. But what is particularly important here is the manipulation of the concept of reality by the Weathermen. What was bourgeois, upper middle-class,
systemic and normative could not possibly be part of authentic reality according to them, consequently it had to be through the antinomian, the barbaric and the dehumanizing that they could allegedly retrieve a true sense of the real for themselves as well as for the American society.

Before the end of 1969, the Weathermen (or “Weatherman”) had already gone underground, forming The Weather Underground, small secret terrorist cells whose sole intention was to provoke damage to the ideological and moral structure of America and overthrow the government. “Barbarism” was the new buzzword in the circles of the collective: “The Weathermen see themselves as playing a role familiar to that of the barbaric tribes such as the Vandals and the Visigoths, who invade the decadent, corrupt Rome.”

This dehumanization was not only ideological but also cultural and moral. The group assumed a “negative identity.” They created a new and all inclusive Weltanschauung of their own. Young couples living in [Weather cells] were required to [break free from] monogamy and to reject natural parenthood. . . . Private relations of love and affection were declared counterrevolutionary, because they represented bourgeois habits. . . . If a terror campaign against the outside world was to start soon, there could be no room for human compassion or exaggerated sensitivity. Everyone had to . . . be ready for the revolution.

According to this logic, if sex is the ultimate form of intimacy in human relationships, it has to be demystified. Allegedly, affection, intimacy, privacy did not affirm the individual’s personal freedom but rather her psychological captivity. In other terms, that is, it was pure physicality, or a new kind of aesthetic sensibility stripped of its bourgeois attire, that the revolutionists wanted to promote. A new aesthetic revolution was at stake involving the awakening of the senses through acts of refamiliarizing oneself with the body, first as materiality and eventually as a brutal machine. In this lens, sexual liberation would prepare the ground for opening up to novel modes of physicality such as the violent engagement with governmental authorities and institutions. Of course, breaking free from monogamy, adopting an aesthetic attitude towards morality, and preparing the body for a future flirtation with physical violence do not automatically lead to an endorsement of terrorism; however, they did create the background against which the insurgent “Weather” mentality flourished.
Terrorist-like tactics might be said to have been introduced into the daily routine of the organization. Performing, for instance, a “gut check” challenge to see how violent members of the collective could get under various circumstances did constitute, if not a terrorist, at least a (para)military method. The idea behind gut checks was that the more violent a member could get the more revolutionary energy she could inject into the organism of the entire team or cell during a riot, insurgency or even a full-fledged revolution. Exhibiting a capacity to inflict pain upon one’s own self or upon one another was crucial to the would-revolutionaries insofar as it demonstrated, amongst other things, the degree in which they could expose themselves to reality as it really was: raw, unemotional, and ruthless. One should not overlook the fact that the Weather Underground comprised mostly middle-class youngsters largely unfamiliar with any kind of violence: those were the privileged and often wealthy youths with excellent education opportunities, and born of families that belonged to the political and social elite of the country. One can easily understand the magical influence that pure violence had upon such persons who, up to that point in time, had always led (or were meant to have led) a comfortable, protected, painless and “boring” life. It is logical to think that for such persons the sheer possibility of exercising real violence would make them feel as if an authentic sense of reality, indeed the very “thingness” of it, would be restored to them. The irresistible passion for tasting the real during the twentieth century, according to Zizek, is perfectly exemplified by the phenomenon of “cutters”—people who harbor an inexplicable desire to cut or hurt themselves so that they can feel alive:

Far from being suicidal . . . cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or . . . to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent. Cutters usually say that once they see the warm red blood flowing out of the self-inflicted wound, they feel alive again, firmly rooted in reality. So, although, of course, cutting is a pathological phenomenon, it is none the less an attempt at regaining some kind of normality.47

Of course, the question here is not cutting oneself but rather cutting “others.” Nonetheless, the aesthetic effect sought is uncannily similar: the more violent and terror-inducing the attack on the government the more successful one’s connection with flesh-and-blood reality.
The aesthetic immediacy of violence—either the one they would inflict or the one that others would inflict upon them—would likely turn the un-aesthesis into aesthesis again by converting tedious, middle-class nonreality into a fascinating landscape where something, rather than nothing at all, would be happening. It should not escape our attention that the occurrence of a political “something”—conceptualized as overthrowing habits of thought, cultural stereotypes, sterile political regimes and ethical imperatives—which would replace the a-political “nothing” was the top priority of the Weather Underground. From such a perspective, breaking away from social and political nothingness or unreality was a lot more than a philosophical and abstract question. The dehumanizing, because dehumanized, new “working-class,” living in conditions of fundamental unfreedom in “factory-like multiversities” that prevent free thinking, would have to strike violently back.48

Despite their radical rhetoric of revolution and violence, the Weather Underground did not turn out to be absolutely determined to take human lives. In their several attacks on buildings and institutions that symbolized the imperialist politics of America in Vietnam—the Capitol, the Pentagon, or even police stations—there were hardly any casualties, only property damage. This might have been due to their zeal to simply make the citizens of the country understand by sending them loud and clear messages about America’s (or rather, “Amerikkka”’s49) supposed terrorist tactics both home and abroad. Still, their nonlethal hits were disproportionate to their extremely aggressive tone adopted in their bulletins and communiqués. Perhaps what they meant to do through the incendiary rhetoric was provoke the public to imitate them in committing analogous revolutionary acts of physical and symbolic violence against the representatives of the state. Sowing the seed of disquietude was identical to spreading uncertainty among the population as to the legitimacy of the government and the right of the ruling elites to encourage an ethics of compromise in the mind of the majority.

What seems ironic, which is also telling about the possibility of the group being uncomfortable contemplating and planning murder or assassination, is that three members of the Weather Underground actually died trying to construct a bomb (which accidentally went off) in Greenwich Village, New York, in March 1970. Metaphorically put, the brutal reality they were seeking for themselves and the public had blown up in their own faces. The Weather Underground might have posed
radical questions to the American public but it failed in radicalizing the majority of the people. Former student and middle-class activism evidently alienated large portions of the population that discerned in the call for revolution a quasi-elitist and, in some cases, utterly aesthetic urge. As was argued, “the revolutionary lifestyle was probably more important than participation in revolutionary violence.” The overall counter-hegemonic aesthetic of the Weather Underground was not totally irrelevant to the aesthetic claims that revolutionary art makes on life and the perception of reality. When Breton and Trotsky, in the “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” declare that “the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society,” adding that “the supreme task of art . . . is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution,” they virtually credit art with the ability to revolutionize or radicalize reality. In a similar fashion, the Weather Underground aspired to stimulate the revolutionary potential of reality by rehearsing artistically the revolution through smaller-scale antinomian and morally outrageous acts.

Another notorious terrorist organization par excellence that managed to spread uncertainty and fear among Western citizens in the 70s was the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany. RAF shared some features in common with the Weathermen insofar as they, too, sprang from a student movement, had a middle-class upbringing, an aversion to conventional morality and a will to fight against a fascist state. In RAF’s mind, the German state was a literal embodiment of fascism and the Nazi ideology. Andreas Baader, leader of the group, once announced: “This fascist state means to kill us all! We must organize resistance. Violence is the only way to answer violence. This is the Auschwitz generation, and there’s no arguing with them!” Baader was referring to the fact that although democracy had been established in West Germany, former Nazis and fascists, still holding governmental posts, continued to rule the country. Another issue on which RAF and the Weathermen shared similar views was the possibility of sexual emancipation as a means of promoting the revolutionary struggle against both, the imperialism of states (the U.S. or the German state) and the “imperialism” of conventional and bourgeois mores that prevented people from rising up against social injustice, chauvinism, and exploitation. Baader had famously horrified members of the Organization of the Liberation of Palestine (PLO) by telling them that “fucking and shooting are the same thing!”
RAF, just like other left-wing terrorist groups operating in Western democracies, attracted publicity usually by kidnapping or assassinating persons who, in their opinion, symbolized the spirit of capitalism and exploitation. Unlike later terrorist organizations that were religiously motivated, they did not kill indiscriminately or haphazardly. Baader had something to say about that question too. You “can’t take your life and place it above that of children and Majorca holiday-makers and say: My life is valuable! That is elitarian madness, bordering on fascism,” he argued with regard to the phenomenon of hijacking planes to achieve certain political goals. The conscious choice to avoid unleashing indiscriminate violence and the “humane” face shown in such statements as the one above rendered the organization somewhat “likeable” to people of leftist orientation (but not exclusively) and more attractive to the eyes of the media that almost turned the leadership of RAF into popular icons.

Terrorism of the older era—before the advent of religious terror at the end of the twentieth century—is always very careful about the image it produces of itself. Left-wing terrorists are very much preoccupied with the question of whether their deeds seem legitimate or unethical to the general public. Accordingly, the “overriding tactical—and, indeed, ethical—imperative . . . has been the deliberate tailoring of their violent acts to appeal to their perceived ‘constituencies.’” If terrorists have an audience, they certainly do not want to lose it. A terrorist act relies upon the image it creates to have any lasting effect on its audience. That image needs to be able to attract attention, of course, but also to avoid sparking a public outrage or undermining the legitimacy of the terrorist act by provoking human decency or taste. A terrorist “craves for” the sympathy of the public/her audience. Similarly, she constructs her narrative diligently so that there are no loopholes or inconsistencies that might undermine the verisimilitude of her beliefs and jeopardize people’s sympathy.

RAF never hesitated to kill; and when it killed, it usually did so in an emphatic way. Consonant with their denouncement of American military presence on German territory, they bombed a U.S. base in Frankfurt in 1972, an attack that led to the death of four U.S. soldiers. A second generation of RAF radicals repeated the act thirteen years later (1985) by bombing the U.S. Rhein-Main Air Force Base, an attack resulting in the death of three persons—this time, civilians. As many as thirty-four deaths have been attributed to RAF activity before its dissolution in 1998. If a
“successful” terrorist organization manages to spread terror that stems from the unexpectedness of its attacks and its persistence in symbolic hits, RAF unquestionably qualified as such a group. More generally, West German terrorism has “instilled [terror] into almost every German heart—from the statesman to the common air traveler, from the business executive . . . to the military commander who, if he does not tremble for himself, does so for his personnel. . . . Thus the first successful effect is the feeling of insecurity created by the terrorists.” Such a feeling is, most of the times, an end in itself and not a means to an end: a terrorist attack is meant to be an aesthetic assault, first of all; a strike at the heart and the senses.

But what exactly did West Germany terrorists want? A comprehensive account of the desires and wishes of Western leftist terrorists, an account that generally fits the RAF profile too, was offered by philosophical writing:

[Terrorists] want The Revolution, a total transformation of all existing conditions, a new form of human existence, an entirely new relationship of people to each other . . . . They want the total and radical breach with all that is. . . . Without a doubt they are utopians. The source of their (self-provided) legitimacy is the utopia which they want to make real. . . . Inside their world . . . there is no voice that could call them back to reason. For them, there is no connection between the vision that drives them and the existing reality that, they feel, keeps them in chains; therefore destruction is the only form of freedom they can accept. . . . [T]he decision to become revolutionaries is the beginning of becoming human. . . . They are fascinated by the magic of the extremes, the hard and uncompromising either/or, life or death . . . “pig” or man—with nothing in between.

This excerpt encapsulates felicitously the radical nature of modern Western terrorism, and more particularly, the nature of RAF’s philosophy. First of all, the terrorists’ utopian vision does not consist of their will to see society revert to an older, more traditional, and thus purer or “innocent” model of life; on the contrary, they aspire to a much better future society that will have done away with the moral and cultural precepts of the past and the present; one that will give humanity the opportunity to be reborn as a “new” kind of existence. Creating a new society rather than re-establishing a traditional mode of living was the explicit—utopian—demand articulated by
Baader’s female comrade Ulrike Meinhof, who shared with the other members a sentiment of demoralization “and a sense of hopelessness with the existing system. . . .” In the terrorist mind bridging the gap between “us” and “them” or between Western bourgeois hypocrisy and authentic existence (that the terrorists supposedly represent) is out of the question because there can be no negotiation between the two extremes. In other words, there is no metanarrative, a third option that could merge the two extremes politically and philosophically. Violence emerges as the only option that guarantees the substitution of the new for the old, and if peaceful “creation” is the language used by hegemonic and imperialist ideologies—even though their concomitant practices are hardly nonviolent—then, “disruption” and “destruction” should be the languages employed by revolutionary forces working against the status quo.

Arguably, the terrorist looks to destruction for an opportunity to redefine the human. Reacting naturally, that is, fiercely, to the ruling elites’ ideas and mentality is the only possible way (as terrorists think) to resist the masses’ dehumanized apathy. Seen through this lens, inhumanity lies with civility and indifference, whereas real humanity can only materialize through the disruption of civility and peace. Destruction is not an exclusively political statement in the case of RAF; it has aesthetic resonances as well. “There is no voice that could call them back to reason” (as the excerpt above states) entails that leftist terrorism depends abundantly upon intuition and imagination, a personal aesthetic and artistic instinct which does not necessarily have to do with the instinct for survival but rather with a primal urge to fantasize about an alternative state of things which might potentially be inaugurated—right here, right now—through radical action. Michael Baumann, strictly speaking not a member of RAF itself but of the 2 June Movement—another terrorist group which preceded RAF and which was eventually incorporated into it—recounts how he “would operate much more by feel” than “reason” when carrying out a transgressive act. No matter how crucial the “application” of political ideology to the act of transgression, Baumann and others discerned the unquestionably forceful presence of aesthetics in politically transgressive acts. In the following excerpt Baumann reveals unknowingly (?) that terrorist mentalities and practices may well feed upon aesthetic issues:

I was a completely normal person. With me it was like this: I suddenly saw a connection between my long hair and the problems that exist in
America. . . . And suddenly . . . I was like a black or Jew or leper. In any event, with long hair you were pushed into the position of an outcast. . . . I liked long hair. With long hair you get a different relationship with yourself, a new identity. . . . You develop a really healthy narcissism which you need simply to survive. After some early youthful confusion, you become more conscious and begin to like yourself.60

On reading Baumann’s words one is shocked to find out that ideology may not be so dominant in his relationship with society, the authorities or himself. It seems that his alternative looks—his long hair—end up shaping the worldview he would develop further only later. Just because he liked his own style, while also knowing that society would not accept his looks, he developed a healthy attitude towards himself (by becoming “wholesomely” narcissistic) as well as an “unhealthy” one towards the outside world. By liking himself, he disliked the others—by “others” we mean social and moral conventions, middle-class people, the authorities, etc. Now, by disliking the others he sought within himself the political reasons for that dislike. Such a simplistic kind of self-introspection may indeed serve to explain how, many times, behind serious political statements, theories and practices lie superficial or non-political motives and justifications.

Ulrike Meinhof, the celebrity terrorist of RAF, may be seen as someone who had constructed her political stance via a narcissistic view of the world. Meinhof was not militant in the beginning; she was an outspoken journalist fighting about issues related to the rights of women. She had devoted herself to a leftist but nonviolent ideology while moving freely in various sophisticated intellectual circles. Gradually though she slid into criminal acts and terrorism. Why? Could it be that one’s own fiery words and narratives may drive one to fall in love with one’s own intellect or beautiful mind? This is quite possible since she might have viewed herself as intellectually superior, one among a handful of “beacons of world revolution and the vanguards of global communism”; or one that “sneered at other intellectuals whose weapons were no more than pens.”61 Meinhof was crossing the line from theoretical insurgency to full-fledged terror when she was heard taking the possibility of murder very lightly. She once admitted that policemen “of course” “can be shot,” a declaration that surprisingly ran counter to her own subsequent practices since “she apparently never touched a gun herself, let alone pulled the trigger.”62 For the
members of RAF, “everyday life [should be] war” against all forms of “Capitalist exploitation and consumerism.” Thus, from the symbolic targeting of specific individuals that supposedly stood for capitalism and consumerism they shifted to indiscriminate violence with just as symbolic a significance. Bombing department stores packed with people would gradually fall within their purview despite the almost certain loss of innocent lives, precisely because for them shopping in luxurious shops rendered those lives anything but “innocent.”

Interestingly, the deadliness of RAF and the lethality of its strikes were underpinned by a philosophy of destruction as a, paradoxically, creative kind of force. Bakunin’s motto that destruction is a creative passion seems to be rather close to the group’s quasi-artistic theory about the world. This theory, however, contained also vestiges of a potentially fascist interpretation of art and the world as inevitably violent, cruel and dehumanizing. One only has to be reminded of futurist Marinetti’s relevant ideas regarding the contiguity between art and violence. RAF’s cruel and fascist “art” spilt over into the real world in the form of a destructive artistic energy aiming at reforming reality and people’s awareness of it. The “utopian” (as it was previously called) vision of the group was artistically realized by the type of Surrealist acts that Andre Breton had in mind when he asked that we . . . casually pull the trigger at anyone who had not fantasized about destroying the petty system of debasement and cretinisation. (see the introduction).

The line separating art and terrorism is extremely thin. However, aside from issues related to art in the strict sense of the term, terrorism posits issues that often have more to do with terrorists’ inventiveness and flexibility when it comes to redefining or reconceptualizing their political goals. In more plain terms, terrorists rely heavily upon their own inventiveness and artistry as to finding a new reason to grapple violently with society. We have already established that terrorist organizations always search for a political aim that they seek to fulfill in a consistent fashion. RAF, just like the Weathermen in America, focused mainly upon the cruelty and inhumanity of the Vietnam War. With the end of the war, though, RAF needed a new cause to legitimize their political existence anew. So, they turned to the Palestinian problem. Baumann himself explained later that that option was consciously made since they needed a reason to continue to exist. It would not be too far-fetched, therefore, to say that there lies an inherently existential or narcissistic motivation in terrorists’ tendency to reconfigure their objectives and thus refashion
If we are to make such an assumption, we also have to be willing to argue that maybe terrorist organizations feed upon their own terrorist deeds to continue to exist, or that their political pronouncements serve as smokescreens behind which hide aesthetic concerns regarding their own self-presentation and their own image or representation as terrorist groups. In such a case, terrorist action is addressed more towards the terrorists themselves than the societal body they claim to reform or radicalize. As Jerrold M. Post asks rhetorically, what, after all, “are freedom fighters if they do not fight?” A terrorist group “needs to commit acts of terrorism in order to justify its existence. The wise leader . . . will plan an action so that the group’s members can reaffirm their identity. . . . This suggests a dynamic within the group pressing for the perpetuation of violence and leading toward ever-riskier decisions.”

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*FBI most wanted poster for Bernadine Dohrn*

Published October 14, 1970

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120968398096261113.html?mod=Letters


US Dept of Justice
Ulrike Meinhof, German journalist and member of the RAF

https://secure.wikimedia.org/otrs/index.pl?Action=AgentTicketZoom&TicketID=480111&ArticleID=598306&QueueID=7
Notes

1. The French authorities had contributed decisively to the apathy of the locals by inculcating in them a feeling of utter inability which was intensified by the exclusion of the indigenous masses from formal education and the suppression of their rights, including the right to the French citizenship.


4. “Outbidding” is not employed here in its original sense. Whereas it usually means the deliberate escalation of violence on the part of one terrorist group so that it has an advantage over a rival group, I use it, at this point, as a psychological tactic adopted by the ruling regime (the state) that wants to gain an advantage over a terrorist organization through not just responding to the latter’s activity by using equal violence but also by employing even harsher and more violent tactics than the terrorists. For the general meaning of “outbidding” see Peter R. Neumann, Old and New Terrorism (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 140-43.

5. The strategy of the FLN was very similar to the Cypriot revolutionary tactics of EOKA (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) whose intention was to overthrow the British rule of the island. In fact, EOKA’s methods were imitated by the FLN. General Georgios Grivas, founder and leader of EOKA, had already, back in 1953, thought through and publicized his plan that involved sensitizing the international community to the Cypriot demand of liberation from Britain and unification with Greece. In the “Preparatory General Plan,” Grivas clearly emphasized the need to “arouse international public opinion . . . by deeds of heroism and self-sacrifice. . . .” (Charles Foley, ed., The Memoirs of General Grivas [London: Longmans, 1964], p. appendix 1, p. 204). As Grivas further explained, “our strategy consisted in turning the
whole island into a single field of battle in which there was no distinction between front and rear, so that the enemy should at no time and in no place feel himself secure. The enemy never knew where and when we might strike. . . . This strategy achieved the . . . wearing down of the enemy’s forces. . . .” (General Grivas, Guerilla Warfare and Eoka’s Struggle, trans. A.A Pallis [London: Longmans, 1964], p. 19). By focusing on an urban rather than military campaign, EOKA managed to attract the attention it needed through accessing the media as means of propagating its objectives.

6. The Wretched of the Earth, pp. 244-45.
7. Ibid., p. 245.
10. The postcolonial project posits that one should go beyond merely countering colonial ideologies and practices, namely beyond decolonization, and strive to attain a cultural identity that is neither pre-colonial nor anti-colonial (“national” and “nationalist,” respectively). That “third” option has been elaborated upon by Homi Bhabha in relation to the Algerian people’s liberation struggle from French imperialist politics. As he says, through the revolution they would become “bearers of a hybrid identity” by disrupting the homogeneity of the nationalist tradition underpinning the politics of resistance to colonialism. In this light, Algeria could never return to the state in which it was before French colonialism, but would rather occupy a “third space” of interculturality and internationality. See, Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 35-7. As Said contends, liberation is a “process” and not a “goal contained automatically by the newly independent nations” (Culture and Imperialism, p. 331).
11. After the war of 1948 Palestinians lived in refugee camps in Egypt (the so-called “Gaza Strip”), Jordan (the “West Bank”), Lebanon and southwestern Syria. It was Egypt’s second president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had encouraged Palestinian nationalism by supporting the first generation of Palestinian terrorists (after 1948) seeking to subvert Israel. After the third Arab-Israeli War, also known as The Six-Day War, between a coalition of Arab states—Egypt, Syria and Jordan—and Israel, the territory that hosted
Palestinian refugees shrank even more: Israel ended up occupying the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula.

12. Law, p. 219.


14. Israel could not but respond on equal terms by attacking the Beirut airport and blowing up as many as thirteen jets that were property of Arab airlines.


19. Neumann, p. 141. Neumann brings up the example of Yasser Arafat who initially did not subscribe to the tactic of suicide bombing of civilian targets, but who was made to engage (as leader of Fatah) in such acts when he realized that the much more ruthless rival group Hamas was threatening his power (p. 141). In order not to be overshadowed by Habash and the Popular Front, Arafat had to demonstrate that he could carry out attacks that were just as lethal and attention-grabbing.

20. Quoted in Law, p. 223.


29. Welcome to the Desert of the Real, p. 165. Here, Zizek echoes Lyotard. The latter talks about how the lack of a metanarrative in an argument prevents the resolution of the conflict between two opposing narratives. Later on in his work, Zizek appears to contradict himself as far as the question of rationalizing is concerned, arguing that today’s societies are so depoliticized that violence is interpreted as something irrational—which it is not (p. 169). If violence is explainable, it might as well turn into something justifiable. Of course it must be stated here that Zizek’s comment on the irrationality of violence related mostly to late twentieth-century and turn-of-the-twenty-first-century violence and terrorism.
33. The extent of her “professionalism” and dedication to the terrorist cause can be seen also from a little detail: after her first hijacking mission, she suffered a plastic surgery that changed some of her facial characteristics so that she could freely participate in a second mission without being recognized. On the other hand, one might argue that her decision to change her looks does not necessarily prove dedication or “professionalism” but rather presumptuousness or self-absorption.
35. Hoffman, p. 194.
37. As noted above, Khaled never participated in an act that entailed the actual death of a hostage. In a sense, therefore, she did constitute a “sublime” figure—both repulsive and attractive to look at or learn of.
41. Law, p. 262.
46. Sprinzak, p. 69.
47. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 11.
49. The triple K, which connotes the racist character of the status quo, was frequently used by the Weather Underground when referring to America.
50. Law, p. 265. What is implied here is the entire counter-cultural stance of the revolutionists, ranging from a rejection of private property to doing drugs or even participating in sex orgies—“immoral” activities intended to kill the bourgeois “virus” inside their pampered bodies!


61. Mahan and Griset, p. 255.


63. Mahan and Griset, p. 255.

64. On a theoretical level, there is a striking similarity between RAF’s ideas about the destructive reformation of the bourgeois world and the idea of a radical rethinking of the carefree consumerist world promoted by the Situationist International (SI), an International organization of social activism made up of
intellectuals and artists of the avant-garde. The Situationist International, whose area of focus was the creation of (potentially explosive) “situations,” was active from 1957 to 1972 and some of its ideas prefigure RAF philosophy as well as its aesthetics of destruction. For instance, the Situationists believe that up until their time—the 60s—artistic movements “have only been imaginary repercussions from an explosion that never took place.” They claim that they are the only movement able “to speak to the project of the authentic artist” “by incorporating the survival of art into the art of life.” See Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., Situationist International Anthology (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 139. The Situationists, just like the RAF terrorists and the Weathermen “vandals” after them, poured their aesthetic ideas and decadent lifestyle into the very philosophy of resistance they had adopted: “It also goes without saying that we unconditionally support all forms of liberated mores, everything that the bourgeois . . . call debauchery. It is obviously out of the question that we should pave the way for the revolution of everyday life with asceticism” (p. 141). Situationist posters created in the immediate aftermath of May 1968 in France even announced that “there is beauty in the streets!” Political action, in other words, was inextricably bound up with an aesthetic appreciation of the world.

65. Having made the point that Marxist RAF’s aesthetic concerns were not completely disengaged from a Futurist or fascist interpretation of reality, it would not be too extravagant to subscribe to the idea that “for many people, [for instance, leftist terrorists], the specific doctrines advanced in fascist and Marxist ideologies were less significant than the opportunity they offered for projects of self-fashioning.” See Jonathan Guy Allen, “Biting the Bullet: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence,” The Journal of Aesthetic Education, vol. 41, no. 2 (Summer 2007): p. 104.

Bibliography


CHAPTER 4

The Twenty-First Century:

Religious Terrorism, Politics, Image and the Brutality of the Spectacular
4.1 The rise of Islamist fundamentalism: Al-Qaeda, paradox, irrationality

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked three American commercial aircraft full of passengers and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York. A few minutes later, both Towers crumbled leading three thousand people to their horrifying deaths. This event, occurring at the dawn of the twenty-first century, represents the defining moment of contemporary terrorism as an ultramodern, or postmodern phenomenon.\(^1\) Those unprecedented terrorist attacks on Western territory did not just shape the ways we view terrorism today but they admittedly divided the world into a pre-9/11 and a post-9/11 one. Simply put, all discussions about terrorism today begin with, or are premised upon, Al-Qaeda’s horrific deeds on that specific day after which, as many people duly repeat, the world will never be the same again.

The decline of leftist and nationalist terrorist violence in the late 1980s was almost simultaneous with the rise, during the following decade, of so-called religious terrorism. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Communist model (which evoked, falsely or not, the sense of the “end of history” and the beginning of a new world order based upon capitalism) delegitimized the socialist agenda as well as leftist struggles around the world including the Middle East. The decline of socialism in combination with the Iranian Islamic revolution reinstated religion in people’s consciousness and legitimized religious violence as well. Indeed, most terrorist attacks during the 1990s were believed to be acts of Islamist fundamentalists or other (non Western) religious fanatics. A prominent example is the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma, USA, which killed 168 people. Before 9/11, that attack was the first mass-casualty terrorist incident on American soil. Responsible for the attack was not a religion-motivated group, as it had been initially surmised, but Timothy McVeigh, an American Gulf War veteran with right-wing convictions and an absolute determination to make them known to the world. The Oklahoma bombing, however, did have something in common with extremist religious (Islamist) violence as it has emerged in the past few decades: they were both non-fastidious and non-particular in terms of the extent of the violence they would exercise.
For the religious terrorist, violence is a “sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators therefore often disregard the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists.” Terrors motivated by religion see themselves as “outsiders” aiming at fundamentally changing the existing order, while “this sense of alienation also enables [them] to contemplate far more destructive and deadly types of terrorist operations than secular terrorists.”

Religious terrorism, nowadays, is seen as permeated by the logic of indiscriminate violence against fellow or foreign civilians with the express purpose of putting a usually political (rather than religious) message across. Therefore, greater lethality means more attention from the media and, consequently, greater persuasiveness through psychological blackmail. Religious terrorists do not take hostages. They aim at killing as many innocent people as possible—rarely do such terrorists acknowledge the innocence of a victim because, in their view, there are no such victims. And even when they have taken hostages, it is just to put them to death or “execute” them in a ritualized manner in front of a camera so that the trembling world can watch through the internet. After 9/11 religious terrorism had almost invariably been associated with Islamist extremist violence which was often repackaged as “new terrorism” that opposed itself to the “old,” revolutionary kind of terrorism:

[T]he coinage of “new terrorism” has been part and parcel of an incendiary discourse that is designed for the sole purpose of relegating “terror” to an alien domain. Unlike “old” terrorism, which is defined as a violent but unlawful form of political resistance, “new terrorism” [supposedly] refers to the non-conventional, non-political and even “irrational” violence that primarily targets western civilians. Furthermore, such “irrationality” of violence is said to be motivated by terrorists’ perception that civilian populations in the west are “complicit” with their state policies against them. If revolutionary terrorism was about “rational” political violence aspiring to right a wrong or point to the need of uprooting an injustice, the “new” kind of terrorism is about “irrational” “political” activity that does not only aspire to punish those accepting the injustice done but also to create generalized confusion as to what its true religious or political goals might be.
Over the past fifteen years Al-Qaeda has been synonymous with religious terrorism, at least until very recently—when ISIS made explicit to the world that a new wave of religious terror that is even more brutal and irrational would rampage the planet. Despite the newness of its 9/11 strike at the heart of America, Al-Qaeda was hardly a new terrorist organization in 2001. The group (whose name in Arabic means “The Base”) appeared in the 1980s during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan when foreign fighters flowed into the country to assist the resisting mujahidin. Allegedly the name of the group was first used in 1988 in reference to a number of Afghan Arabs who had agreed to be part of an Islamic “rapid reaction force” whose mission was to oppose future invaders of Muslim territories. Al-Qaeda’s ideology and goals were never hard to define theoretically. Starting off with the “sinful” presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden, leader of the group at the time of the September 11 attacks, now dead, went on to talk about the necessity of uniting all Muslim believers (the ummah) and creating an independent Muslim state—a caliphate—ruled by shariah law and the moral, social, and religious practices related to a close and literal (rather than a metaphorical and metaphysical) reading of the Koran. According to Laden, the creation of the caliphate—which, by the way, ISIS is currently (at the time of writing this project in 2015) consolidating—has always been prevented by the continuous and tyrannical interference of the West in the Middle East.

Al-Qaeda primarily addresses a Muslim constituency and calls attention to the fact that it is Christian Crusaders as well as a Zionist conspiracy (the Jews) that work against the possibility of the caliphate. In other words, the West has supposedly declared war on Islam and therefore Muslims have to strike back by unleashing “jihad” (interpreted by Islamist militants as “armed struggle” even though it only means “struggle”) in order to protect the ummah from the presumed unholy Western conspiracy. The problem is that Al-Qaeda, to counteract the influence and activity of the West on Muslim countries, announced jihad not just against Western forces (military personnel as well as civilians, diplomats, etc.) but also against corrupt—that is, secular—Islamic regimes that promote the interests and mores of the West in the area. In fact, the Al-Qaeda terrorists declared jihad even against Muslim populations that, according to them, are not “Islamic” or “Muslim” enough, that is, not staunch and consistent defenders of the Koran. It is evident from the above that it has become almost impossible to narrow down to just a few categories the parties, people, or
countries that over the years Al-Qaeda has threatened with terrorist violence. Reading or listening to such chilling messages as the one below makes one think that it all comes down to practically a total annihilation of “nonbelievers”—this last category obviously being broadly and arbitrarily defined:

Allah commanded us to strike the Kuffar (unbelievers), kill them, and fight them by all means necessary to achieve the goal. The servants of Allah who perform Jihad . . . are permitted to use any and all means necessary to strike the active unbeliever combatants for the purpose of killing them, snatch their souls from their body, cleanse the earth from their abomination. . . . The goal must be pursued even if the means to accomplish it affect . . . unintended passive [populations] such as women, children and any other passive category specified by our jurisprudence. This permissibility extends to situations in which Muslims may get killed if they happen to be . . . near the intended enemy. . . . Although spilling sacred Muslim blood is a grave offense, it is . . . mandated in order to prevent . . . [the abandonment of] Jihad. . . .

“Jihad,” then, is the magical word, the password through which Al-Qaeda terrorists have access to an ever-expanding world of religious conflict and apocalyptic rage. It is the metaphysical key to unlocking maximalist (but wistful) thoughts about Islamic world domination. “Jihad” as a slogan or catch-all phrase points to the embodiment of an apocalypse, the sublime realization of God’s will at the expense of apostates, nonbelievers, polytheists and generally all those doing harm to Islam. The very utterance of the word “jihad,” that is, serves to spread fear in the mind of the enemy as well as the hearts of their own Muslim constituencies.

Aside from being an essential signal for generalized insurrection against the domination of evil, “jihad” functioned also as a rhetorical ploy for playing into the darkest fantasies of Western and Islamic people, and thereby ensuring that the right message would be received by the intended audience. Al-Qaeda was always anxious about its efficiency in communicating the threat it posed to Western hegemony as well as persuading Islamic militants that changing the world was a cause well worth fighting for. Like all terrorist organizations, Al-Qaeda depended upon the media to reach its audiences, mostly Arab television networks and the internet. We have already established that terrorists have a certain fascination with incendiary words and
impressive statements regarding a future act of asymmetric violence, almost as if they wanted to preempt the legitimacy of their otherwise unacceptable behavior; or as though the verbal message added real meaning and alleviating symbolism to their deed. What usually happened in Al-Qaeda’s case was that the Western media would rebroadcast and translate the messages in English for the whole world to hear. On the one hand, the “exoticism” of the language imbued Laden’s message with mystery and fearsomeness, but on the other, it pointed to the danger of Western constituencies becoming “lost in translation”: 

While this global communication strategy acted as a force maximizer for Al Qaeda’s messages, it risked misdirecting them. . . . On the one hand, [the group was trying to] convince targeted governments that its policy goals [were] limited to the Middle East . . . [and on the other it] sought to mobilize [militant Islamists] by pledging to transform the entire world. . . . To counteract this problem, Al Qaeda typically addressed the audience to whom it was speaking. 

Al-Qaeda, therefore, was always conscious of the power of rhetoric and the importance of spoken messages and their communicability to diverse audiences. Its close attention to rhetoric, narrative and theoretical substantiation of the validity and necessity of destructive violence will be useful later, in our discussion of the differences between the practices and (almost ideological) assumptions of Al-Qaeda and the apolitical and hardly ideological conceptions underpinning the more recent terrorist outrages of the Islamic State.
4.2 Modernity, religiousness, and the Enlightenment premise

How is it possible that one is still overemphasizing religion, let alone religious terrorism, at the turn of the twenty-first century? Why is religion so important to over-technological modernity? Shouldn’t we have made the transition from superstition and religiousness to reason and rationality as the Enlightenment had already predicted we would do? According to the principles of the mid-eighteenth century, human behavior would be enlightened by the activation of logic and by the act of prioritizing human experience and systematized thought over tradition, prejudice and mysticism. Empirical thought and the natural sciences would liberate humanity from the chains of religious metaphysics and convention thereby allowing it to progress into the future in unimaginable ways. Progress through logic constituted one of the basic premises of the Enlightenment, a premise which was in direct opposition to the dogmatic thought and determinism of the Catholic Church in Europe.
One of the assumptions of the eighteenth century was that scientific progress and enlightened thought would emancipate humanity from religious belief and the medievalism of the church: the more educated the people the less dependent upon religious institutions. The ideas of progress, rationality and logic still underlie the modern (Western) world. Paradoxically, however, the more we progress towards the future and a more sophisticated and technologically advanced society, the more we seem to regress into a less secular state: “By the mid-1970s . . . sociologists and anthropologists were surprised to find that the seemingly unstoppable advance of secularism had come to a halt. Instead, conservative religious groups were springing up on all continents and in all cultures.”

In the Middle East, predominant was the example of Iran with the overthrow of the Shah by Khomeini in 1979—the so-called Islamic revolution—and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1980, a year after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini set the parameters for what exactly the existence of an Islamic state entailed and left no doubt about the origin of sponsorship of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism:

We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the world and must abandon all idea of not doing so, for not only does Islam refuse to recognize any difference between Muslim countries, it is the champion of all oppressed people. . . . We must make plain our stance toward the powers and superpowers and demonstrate to them despite the arduous problems that burden us. Our attitude to the world is dictated by our beliefs.

In other words, Khomeini predicts the shattering of all secularist regimes in the area and grounds that prediction upon the premise of the superiority of Islamic law to non-Islamic or secular law. Such a belief paves the way for sanctioning, in the future, terrorist activity (undertaken by religious groups espousing Khomeini’s system of beliefs) that will be based upon the premise of Islam’s “natural” superiority.

In modern times, to progress from hard-gained secularism back to religious fundamentalism constitutes a paradox. How can that paradox be explained? If modernity is associated with individual liberty, economic freedom, aestheticism and secularism, why has it turned religious at the same time? For one thing, religious revivals at the end of the twentieth century seem to have countered precisely the overwhelming domination of globalization—a by-product of modernity. If globalization attends to the needs of the “global community”—which is homogenized
and voracious—who will attest to the particular needs of local communities? In other words, globalization may have proved beneficial in many respects—in connecting people from different places in the world, for instance—but it has frustrated expectations in some other cases. Societies, especially of the Middle East or Africa that haven’t gone “fully global” yet, may experience globalization as a threat. From their perspective, not only does globalization seem to fail to deliver on the promise of prosperity, it is sometimes viewed as a pretext for the imposition of alien values and culture. Globalization, therefore, has accentuated the conflict between the pre-modern, modern and late modern sections of developing societies and, thus, contributed to the general sense of instability which has marked many of these countries’ recent history.

[In this context of emotional, psychological and economic insecurity], religion was the more obvious source of identity. . . . Religion offered a sense of direction and guidance . . . and provided meaning, direction and a sense of belonging in a world which appeared to have lost its way.12

In several cases, the economic plight of those living in societies that have been left behind or haven’t adapted to the new laws of globalization soon enough may well lead them directly in the arms of religious fundamentalism. In Jean Baudrillard’s own terminology, today’s fundamentalist terrorism “is not the product of a traditional history of anarchism, nihilism, and fanaticism” but rather constitutes “the contemporary partner of globalization.” The religious (Islamist) fundamentalist—who is the carrier of just one type of fundamentalism, the other being Western and Christian fundamentalisms—emblematizes the existence of a “heterogeneous force” (which, for Baudrillard, is just one among many other heterogeneities) working against not only “the global-techno-culture” but also “the mental system of globalization” which favors a terrible homogenization of cultural particularity. In this framework, there breaks out “a crushing revisionism vis-à-vis modernity and progress” which takes the form of a non-historical as well as non-nostalgic “violent, abnormal, and irrational” reaction against the “abstract universality of the global.”13 Baudrillard implicitly accepts the notion that this “irrationality” may present itself as such—as “irrational”—in the mind of the globalizing West.
In a nutshell, reverting to religion in modern and late modern societies of the East or the West by no means entails a return to a traditional or more authentic way of living; rather it constitutes a forceful reaction to globalization—which, for countries of the Second or Third World is seen as a Trojan horse, an insidious way for the West to infiltrate the societies and cultures of the rest of the globe and impose its own values upon them. In that sense, both the emergence of religion and religious terrorism at the turn of the twenty-first century constitute new phenomena rather than older forms of political expression. For example, is there any real traditional and historical dimension in Osama bin Laden’s December 2001 public declaration blatantly calling for a ruthless jihad against all other religions? In his “Message to the Youth of the Muslim Ummah,” Laden argues that jihad has become fard-ain [obligatory] upon each and every Muslim. . . . The time has come when all the Muslims of the world, especially the youth, should unite and soar against the kufr [nonbeliever] and continue jihad till these forces are crushed to naught, all the anti-Islamic forces are wiped off the face of this earth and Islam takes over the whole world and all other false religions.\textsuperscript{14}

Obviously, Laden’s “jihad,” launched in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in New York, bears ahistorical and utopian overtones that create a mythical reality of a long-awaited battle between Islam and its infidel adversaries. Long before 2001, Samuel Huntington, in “The Clash of Civilizations,” had ascertained that by no means did history “end” after the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War insofar as major conflicts between civilizations and religions were in store in the twenty-first century. Huntington was partly correct to talk about the probability of religious wars in the new century, but what he could not have anticipated are the ruptures created within each civilization by separate religious sects, extremist factions or parties who speak arbitrarily in the name of religion as a whole.

Bin Laden’s “Message to the Youth” cited above can very well be interpreted in that framework. He speaks in the name of all the Muslims and empowers himself as the sole defender of Islam on earth by invoking a twisted version of jihad to fit his polarizing agenda. It could be argued that his fundamentalist vision of Islam taking over the whole world represents a revisionary attempt to reconceptualize Islam as always already inimical to all other (inferior) religions and as the only authentic form of human existence. Such an attempt points towards reconstructing the traditions and
culture of Islam by treating them retrospectively as other than what they truly were; namely, by treating them as self-righteously fundamentalist. In this parallel universe where Islam is reconfigured as intrinsically fundamentalist and intolerant of other cultures and lifestyles, the Islamic element becomes Islamist.

Islamist fundamentalism/terrorism is a rather recent phenomenon that has emerged as a reaction to the suppression of religion as the dominant way of living and a public affair in the modern world. In general, fundamentalism fiercely opposes modern societies’ tendency to render religious belief a private affair. Fundamentalists espouse (what they see as) “fundamental” values ranging from an austere lifestyle to a close and literal interpretation of holy texts. It goes without saying that Islamist fundamentalists feel that their dreams of living a flawless holy life cannot be fulfilled in modern secularism that favors the separation of religion from the public sphere and prioritizes a globalized or even hybrid identity for the citizen. As a result, they develop the propensity to cordon themselves off from the cosmic, cosmopolitan—and thereby, hubristic—(Westernized) world by alienating themselves from it, and often, by radicalizing themselves.

Islamist terrorism is inextricably intertwined with the notion of Islam as a political entity rather than religious dogma. Political Islam (or Sunni Islam), very much a product of the second half of the twentieth century, has justified several acts of terror against “infidels”—that is, people not worshipping Allah but a different kind of God—throughout the years and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Islamist terrorism has defined the precarious age we are living in. When the religious element turns political, metaphor turns into pure literality, and this is exactly the mechanism of rationalization activated by Islamist fundamentalists who, driven by their fanaticism and, more often than not, misled by their insufficient education and their eagerness to find in real life the exact analogue of theoretical and metaphorical teachings from their holy books, rush into terror and acts of extreme violence in order to construct ways of aligning theory and reality (or belief and action). The high death toll that we witness nowadays when there is a terrorist attack by Islamist fundamentalists is related to the attackers’ agonizing attempt to provoke the ruling regime by challenging its stability through acts that generate great publicity and encouraging other Muslims to join their movement against the common enemies. Their violent acts carry a strange symbolism that resembles the propaganda of the deed adopted by many different terrorist organizations or movements of the past.
The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one of the most radical religious terrorist groups of the twentieth century, embodied the spirit of Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism insofar as it called for jihad—which, in this case, carries the meaning of the violent overthrow of the Egyptian government—so that a true Islamic state might flourish under the rules of shariah law. Sayyid Qutb, the “ideological godfather of Islamist militancy,” spoke of the need to fight the oppression of anti-Islamic governments alongside their Western allies and collaborators. The underlying assumption here is that one is inevitably anti-Islamic if one is allied to a Western government or culture. Fanaticism springs directly from such a dichotomous, polarized, thinking that recognizes that self (Islam) and other (non-Islam) are poles apart from each other. Another popular Islamist (Sunni) organization unleashing terror in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood was a group called Al-Jihad, or “The Islamic Group of Egypt” which became famous after the successful assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Al-Jihad allegedly wanted Egypt to be governed by Islamic law and its intention was to bring about a popular uprising of Muslims. Its leader, Abd Al-Salam Faraj, a former electrician without any religious education worth speaking of—half-education or none at all was the typical motif in Sunni Islamist organizations—took the Koran to the letter as far as the interpretation of “jihad” is concerned, wishing to render metaphoric language into full-blown physical reality (or what we think of as metaphysical religion into real, political action), thus coming up with, or inventing, a model for converting words (or literature) into gory deeds, as if squeezing real blood out of words of insurgency and resistance. The “unaesthetic” dimension of the holy text would, in other words, be rendered audible, palpable and “aesthetic.”

In a pamphlet that Faraj wrote entitled The Neglected Duty, he argues that those that interpret the word of the Koran and the real life of Muhammad in a metaphorical or abstract manner are the ones who actually betray the faith of the Muslims. In addition, all those religious scholars who take jihad to mean primarily a spiritual struggle against one’s own evil and weak nature serve the interests of modernist, apathetic and utterly blasphemous status quos and regimes. According to Faraj, going back to jihad means resuscitating Islam. This struggle will have to be the responsibility of all men (as it used to be in the distant past) and not just the military. Faraj points out that if one takes a good look at Muhammad’s life, one realizes that jihad as fighting can only mean “confrontation and blood.” As the Koran orders,
“[s]lay the polytheists wherever ye find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere”; fight them “and God will punish them at your hands, will humiliate them and aid you against them and bring healing to the breasts of people who are believers.” Of course, the holy book of Islam is here referring to the polytheists but that is a minor detail for Faraj who ventures willfully or not into a relative misreading of it. Apostates have to be terrorized and killed according to Faraj:

The Rulers of the Age are in apostasy from Islam. They were raised at the tables of Imperialism, be it Crusaderism or Communism or Zionism. They carry nothing from Islam . . . though they pray . . . and claim to be Muslims. It is a well-established rule of Islamic law that the punishment for an apostate will be heavier than for [someone] who is by origin an infidel. . . . An apostate has to be killed even if he is unable to go to war. An infidel who is unable to go to war should not be killed.18

If apathy, moderation and consensus among different civilizations constitute blasphemous behaviors for Islamist fundamentalists, the injunction to take matters into their own hands—“God will punish them at your hands” —is decisive in the transformation of a radical theorist of violence into an active militant and a terrorist. Philosophically speaking, modernist apathy—symptomatic of globalization’s leveling tendencies, if we are to agree with Baudrillard—is here treated as the exact opposite of Islamist militancy and self-legitimating violent action. In this light, the true Muslim is apparently one who dispenses justice himself as God’s only representative on earth and in His very name, rather than someone who stoically as well as indolently awaits the Second Coming in order to judge or be judged.

4.3 Aesthetic attraction to apocalyptic violence

The various misinterpretations of Islamism revolving around the conscious attempts to restore to Islam the terrible power and significance it supposedly had in the past have led to the appearance of Islamist violence. Qutb’s and Faraj’s violent revisionist representations of the Islamic faith and practice created misconceptions as to the real
nature and meaning of religion. Islamist terrorists think of God as a real megacomputer who grants actual, tangible power to those He thinks fit. There is nothing more aesthetically appealing than the image of God as a powerful leader bestowing upon the chosen ones the gift of deciding who lives and who dies, an image resembling that of a soldier of the Apocalypse. There is nothing more irreligiously attractive than a vengeful God inflicting terrorist violence against anyone who does not comply with His exhortations. If religion is a narrative about power, then it sounds like a beautiful one:

Islam means “submission.” Theologically, it means submission to God. . . . But historically it has meant . . . submission to authority, to tradition, to culture, and sometimes even to the baser human instincts. . . . The corruption of the religious scholar and the distortion of religious knowledge are the most profound and difficult moral tests that Islamic society must undergo. The Prophet Muhammad . . . was aware of how the interpretation of religion depends on human perceptions. . . . Many contemporary Muslims tend to think of God as an instrument of power. Not as . . . the Motivator of the Universe, but as a personal power source . . . that can be called on to defeat or outstrategize your opponents. . . . If you pay your dues to God by maintaining basic rituals and practices . . . God will requite you by smashing your enemies.19

Islamist radicals endorsing acts of terrorist violence espouse an exclusivist rather than pluralist interpretation of the Koran—which is incidentally already suffused with pluralistic elements and examples of respecting difference and the other.20 The renunciation of pluralist readings of the holy book by hard-line Islamists resulted in the persecution of all—non-Muslims and Muslims alike—who, in the radicals’ eyes, risked contaminating Islam with the moral laxity and religious backsliding of modernity or were positively predisposed towards the possibility of a sincere negotiation and communication with other religious or cosmic cultures. Exclusivists sought to cleanse Islam of its foreign influences by violent means since they were “looking for a ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ language in which to criticize the failed modern Muslim state, a state that had marginalized or displaced traditional religious authorities. . . .”21 Understanding Islam (and any other religion) in such a monolithic mode leads such groups as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to attack not only Western targets but
also “a centuries-old multivocal tradition of pluralism within Islam.”
Islamist fundamentalism, that is, lays claim to such transcendental signifiers as “purity,” “authenticity” and Islamic “truth” which, however, point to an aestheticized and mythical Islamist past—the original Islamic society of perfect harmony, purity and divinity established by Muhammad and his comrades.

Qutb, who laid the ideological foundation for Al-Qaeda’s terrorism, taught that that “original” perfect society can be created again not by laymen and common people who have fallen prey to the cobweb of the West, but by a special vanguard of true believers who will organize jihad against the forces of decadence and make sure that the full “sovereignty of God” over every layer of society and life will be restored. Qutb’s visualization of a society with no formal power structures and his firm belief in violence as a reliable means of purifying the world are based upon a made-up myth about Islam as the only source of vitality on earth. What is striking, however, is that to shore up that mythical conception Qutb resorts to aesthetic elaborations of Islam’s superiority. For instance, he contends that religious imagination, rather than logic or intellect, has a catalytic role in the formation of the Islamic movement:

Is aesthetics more powerful and dwarfing than the religious Word, then? Radical Islamism providing the theoretical groundwork for Islamist terrorism looks to the power of images, archetypes and symbols for evoking in the “true” believers’ minds a sense of epic and history making, and thereby rendering the myth of purity a realistic goal for the future.
4.4 9/11 or the sublime image of terror

The emergence of Al-Qaeda marked the advent of an unprecedented kind of international terrorism, one which did not have as its sole intention to publicize a cause or send a message, or even assassinate a statesman or any person of high stature for symbolic reasons; with Al-Qaeda we are reaching new high levels of terrorist destruction which aims consciously at killing innocent civilians in large numbers mostly through suicide attacks but also through planting bombs in symbolic or not areas that are packed with people. The older strategy of hijacking civilian aircraft to divert them to a different location and subsequently make political demands by capturing passengers as hostages was abandoned in favor of more shocking and thereby more effective strategies—destroying aircraft and killing the passengers was suddenly a more fitting choice.

Aside from the impact that Al-Qaeda’s cruel deeds self-evidently had on the citizens of the world, its leadership seemed frequently to wish to plant terror in people’s minds through frightening words and intimidating language. Osama bin
Laden, along with Ayman al-Zawahiri (the former second-in-command, now leader of Al-Qaeda after Laden’s death), had always demonstrated a propensity for dramatic announcement—mostly via video-taped messages disseminated through DVDs or uploaded on certain websites—regarding their future targets. In addition, both exhibited an interest in meticulously explicating the rationale behind attacks which would take place in the future. Bin Laden, especially, seemed to have a preference for narrative, a discursive and theoretical legitimation of Islamist “activism” aiming at persuading the receivers of his messages of the truthfulness and moral righteousness of his acts against people who had allegedly committed crimes and, as a result, were getting their comeuppance for them: “Terrorizing you, while you carry weapons in our land, is a legitimate right and a moral obligation. . . . These youths [our fighters] love death as you love life. . . . They will sing out that there is nothing between us that needs to be explained, there is only killing and neck-smiting.”

On the one hand, bin Laden resorts, reasonably but not rationally, to moral law and ethical obligation to foreground the legitimacy of killing in cold blood, providing also the justification for his acts: “[Y]ou carry weapons in our [holy] land”; on the other, he invokes the terrible and self-justifying materiality of “neck-smiting” which needs no theoretical elaboration or moral grounding. Thus he appears firm in an almost unconditional espousal of violence while reverting to a rhetorical exegesis of his group’s effectiveness: “[W]e love death as you love life.” If bin Laden’s words were accurate (and, as it turned out, they were) his strategic methodology was flawless. If the terrorists did not care about the mundane world but only about the metaphysical plains of the after-life, then they already had an advantage over those desperately clinging to the pleasures of life: to opt for life at all costs rendered one weak and faint-hearted. On the same wavelength as bin Laden, but more specific than him, al-Zawahiri issued a fatwa bestowing upon every Muslim the holy “duty” to kill Americans and their allies—both civilians and military—to punish them for their continuing imperialist presence in the middle East.

In spite of all the grandiose proclamations of Al-Qaeda, its actions, albeit lethal and provisionally quite effective in attracting attention to its causes, failed in making a lasting impression upon the international community or igniting horror that was necessary in order to awaken Muslim conscience. The reason was that most of its attacks took place far away from the Western stage thus hardly arousing a serious interest in its deadly operations. For instance, its simultaneous strike at as many as
three American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Tanzania in August 1998 may have killed 224 people and injured almost 5,000 others, but still, it did not succeed in sending a clear message to America or its allies because it was “local” and, at least seemingly, irrelevant to the group’s theoretical declarations and manifestos: ironically, mostly African Muslims rather than Americans were killed. In fact, the hit backfired on Al-Qaeda since it created confusion as to its supposed “ethics” as well as outrage at the “meaninglessness” of the deaths—as we have already emphasized so far, terrorism, symbol and meaning go hand in hand, and the latter two were certainly lost on the people worldwide. Also, to empathize with the victims the Western viewer would have to feel close to them, both geographically as well as emotionally, and this definitely was not the case. Perpetrating an atrocity far away from the gaze of the interested party might, at best, raise transitorily some theoretical concern, puzzlement or a certain degree of sympathy for the victims but it wouldn’t seriously raise any eye brows in a dramatic way. For an act of terror to have any real effect of . . . terror and panic upon those who are the real addressees of the terrorizing act, it needs to be able to affect almost physically, or at least threaten to affect tangibly and dramatically its audience. If terrorism relies immensely upon the images it creates, and if it is not only about killing but also sending multiple messages to a diverse body of spectators, apparently the dramatic (but utterly real) act of violence has to be brought much closer to the audience that now cannot shrink from seeing or gazing at the act of horror, probably at their own risk. The terrible image, an image of terror, has to be brought home somehow. . . .

Such an image of terror and horror was indeed brought home by Al-Qaeda to the U.S. on the morning of September 11, 2001, the first large-scale terrorist catastrophe provoked by Islamist fundamentalists on Western, American soil. Before 9/11, when two hijacked planes were crashed deliberately into the great symbols of capitalism and economy in downtown Manhattan, an act that was, let us recall, almost live on TV channels internationally, and until two more hijacked planes headed for the Pentagon and the White House to finish their destructive mission, nobody had thought that Al-Qaeda would have been capable of making good on its “promises” articulated by its leader in the previous years. That was obviously not an attack that intended to spread terror among its immediate victims, the passengers—who were definitely alarmed, yet hardly aware of what was really happening; it was an attack that aimed at spreading terror among those witnessing it. Never before was
Islamic fundamentalism and American citizens/viewers in such a close proximity to each other at the very heart of America, something which created for the first time an eerie feeling of terrorism’s palpability and brutal reality. Whereas in the past mass religious terror concerned other countries and nations, which automatically turned every act into something too distant and therefore too unreal and quasi-fictional, this time every citizen of the First World—including the “non innocent” (according to bin Laden) Americans—would be able to have an almost first-hand experience of real terror and thus get a taste of the real horror felt by citizens in other less developed countries around the globe.

9/11 admittedly ushered into the new era a novel form of ultra-terrorism that combined high efficiency, accuracy, inventiveness and infinite inhumanity on the part of the terrorists. Everybody agreed to the unprecedented nature of the attack. True, attacking the heart of Western economy and democracy using the West’s own technological means—civilian aircraft—and modernist products—such as the Twin Towers—against themselves seemed not just diabolical but also utterly ironic. Indeed, the irony consisted in the realization that the whole operation was highly theatrical, a performance trying to persuade the spectators of the ruthlessness of the actors. The terrorists (or “performance artists”) played the ordinary passengers to fool the airport’s surveillance cameras, pretended to hold real weapons (they only held paper cutters), pretended to be able to fly the planes as real pilots (they had received rudimentary training mostly through simulation programs and video games, also taking a crash course on flying at an American school), and finally pretended to divert the aircraft elsewhere (rather than crash it), in order not to alarm the passengers too much. As Rustom Bharucha argues perceptively, terrorists are usually “effective because they infiltrate security zones with all the performative accoutrements of ‘normal’ behavior, circumventing the protocols of surveillance. They are, for the most part, highly skilled performers, who accomplish their roles through rigorous training, supplemented by improvisatory audacity and a readiness to kill and die.” After all, “what kind of an impostor/infiltrator would one be if one allowed one’s ‘true’ identity to be revealed through the camouflage of pretense?”29 All that pretense, however, contributed to the spawning of a gory reality that looked paradoxically too fictional to be true.

What added to the theatrical and ironic dimension of the attacks was the feeling that it was essentially not an outside agency that had created such a chaos. It
was rather a force on the inside—or better an *inside* force—that achieved the unthinkable deed. The aircraft were products/symbols of Western technology, while the terrorists lived for long as ordinary citizens among other Western citizens. In other words, the enemy was invisible (hence, invincible) because it was intrinsic to the system, posing as a structural “failure” within it. Derrida is right to argue that the nature of the attacks resembled to a great extent the logic of the “autoimmune” system attempting to protect itself against the . . . protecting mechanisms of the system’s (that is, the state’s) security. To do that, the autoimmune system has to self-destruct intentionally.\textsuperscript{30}

September 11 fulfilled both criteria for what a terrorist outrage at the turn of the century constitutes: it killed three thousand people without hesitation and it sent a powerful visual message to those witnessing it. In other words, it fulfilled the criteria of great lethality and effective (as well as dramatic) communicativeness. The performative dimensions of the attacks were not lost on viewers and artists who admitted to having felt some kind of “envy” at the “artistic perfection” and “professionalism” of the strikes.\textsuperscript{31} Novelists and fiction writers withdrew “backstage” letting journalists covering the events take over and try to describe the indescribable or inconceivable using tropes, literary devices and apocalyptic language.

Terrorism without the image of it is next to nothing. There is an unquestionable aesthetic side to the phenomenon, which is more important than people are ready to accept. In the age of information, media and the internet, a terrorist act has no impact on the world unless it has reserved some space in the collective imaginary. Although terrorism depends upon the media to transmit a message, make an impression and finally achieve its goals, one would expect that because of the growth of telecommunications and the multifariousness of world communications terrorism would manage to get through more easily and quickly. However, this is not exactly the case. In fact, it is precisely the opposite: because of the endless (mostly fictional) violence to which audiences are exposed every day, attracting attention has become an even more demanding task for a terrorist organization:

> [N]ot only has media consumption become more diversified, people are less likely to be shocked or terrified by displays of violence . . .

> [T]he amount of violence on television screens has risen substantially. . . . [I]ncreasing amounts of violence [on the TV] have raised the
threshold for what is considered “shocking” or “terrifying” by the viewing public. . . . [Thus greater] brutality and lethality is by far the most common way for terrorists to “get the message through” in the media age. . . . [Engaging] in increasing brutality [has the purpose of matching the] audience’s expectation of what “terrorism” is about.  

Without a doubt, American (and more generally, Western) audiences have long accustomed themselves to viewing scenes of unspeakable catastrophe in big budget Hollywood films. For that reason, they make a very demanding body of viewers. More crucially, if the level of violence in cinematic films has risen, then audiences and spectators will have become more and more desensitized to the atrocities shown, and, by definition, they will be more insensitive to real violence, when that occurs, since that violence will look fictional and fake to them. In fact, many Americans reacted to the image of 9/11 in a way that suggested that they were treating the atrocity as if it were a scene from a Hollywood film; a film, though, that had surpassed in quality and verisimilitude anything that they had watched up to that point. Still, the incessant reruns of the attacks on TV channels made everyone less and less sensitive to the horrid view—owing to overexposure—and evoked the feeling that the attack was actually not real; through the repetition of the scene over and over, the attack turned into a visually powerful spectacle, and an aesthetic, hence fictional, object. Ironically therefore, while the terrorists had ventured into an unprecedented operation in order to bring the horror of the real to the American public, that horrendous reality was increasingly turning into a fictional aesthetic product to be consumed by spectators around the world.

Despite its immoral aesthetics, actually because of it, the imagery of 9/11 lost almost nothing of its sublime quality throughout the years—sublime, in the Kantian and Burkean sense of simultaneously repelling and covertly attracting the eye. Besides, if we are so much familiar with scenes of cinematic catastrophe, then perhaps we can only appreciate and comprehend a real catastrophe on condition that it looks fictional; as though in order to fully experience our own plight we needed to put ourselves at a distance from it, thus treating it as if it were somebody else’s plight.

One can go as far as to say that 9/11 cannot “exist,” in a larger sense, without its (by definition, fictional TV) image, and this is exactly what keeps the attack frightening and fascinating at the same time. We should remind ourselves, at this point, that, strictly speaking, the attempt at destroying the towers with thousands of
people inside them was not the first in history. In February 1993 there had been another, only much less spectacular, attempt to demolish the lofty structures by another group of Islamist radicals who would later become part of Al-Qaeda. The bombing, supposedly as retaliation for the U.S. support of Israel, claimed the lives of six people but failed to bring down the towers or send a powerful image of destruction on an international level. Metaphorically, the 1993 attack was only a preview or low-quality rehearsal for the actual “first performance” mounted on 9/11.  
For Baudrillard, 9/11 as an uncanny image of unthinkable terror was the “mother” of all events, “the pure event” that encapsulated “all the events that have never taken place.” It is almost as though the absence of any landmark events during the 1990s had “exploded” into a singular symbolic occurrence of massive proportions:

The collapse of the . . . towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. An excess of violence is not enough to open on to reality. For reality is a principle . . . and it is this principle that is lost. . . . [T]he fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image. . . . We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it . . . [but] there is none. And it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us.

When Baudrillard says that we can ascribe no meaning to the attacks he means that the extremely violent singularity we witnessed on that day is irreducible to any single logical cause trying to account for it—for instance, the injustice towards the Palestinians, or the unholy presence of U.S. forces on Saudi Arabia. Inevitably, the radicality of the violent spectacle has compensated for the impossibility of a logical explanation. The “terrorism of spectacle,” as he calls it, consists of the fact that the irreducible image of spectacular terrorism has erased completely the need for narrative and explanatory words: the unforgettable picture, that is, is worth a thousand words; only, one cannot possibly know what those words might be. The image “consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption.”

Baudrillard thinks that the violence inflicted by Al-Qaeda terrorists is symbolic and spectacular (unlike, one might claim, the violence of ISIS) and, therefore, not absolutely “real,” in the sense that it aspires to humiliate rather than kill. Al-Qaeda has almost always chosen symbolic targets upon which it has unleashed its more or
less spectacular terrorism—9/11 represented the culmination of terrorist spectacularity. Nevertheless, this element of spectacularity should not blind us to the absolute fact of the excruciating pain and horrible death of all those who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just because the “spectacle” of 9/11 did not show real blood and horrible suffering (mostly due to the instantaneity of the hits and the media’s inevitable focus upon the exterior of the buildings) it does not mean that death had not called on the victims in all imaginable ways. One could actually build upon that omission of real blood and suffering to make a case for the inherent immorality of the image of catastrophe at hand.

When it comes to discussing terrorism, grappling unknowingly with aesthetics is almost inevitable (and probably immoral too). The example of dwelling upon the newness or not of a terrorist strike is a case in point. Especially with regard to September 11, the unbearable cliché is that “the world will not be the same after this catastrophe,” or that “the attacks mark the beginning of a new era”—as if we knew what the “old era” was like. Baudrillard does think that 9/11 constitutes a novel kind of terrorism—one that combines inventiveness, accuracy, technical expertise, courage, a sense of irony, and a primal drive towards death—but other theorists disagree on the question of newness. For Zizek, for instance, the spectacular air crash into the WTC is the epitome of twentieth-century terrorism insofar as it relies upon a flagrant type of extreme, almost pornographic, visibility. By contrast, the twenty-first century, in his opinion, will be characterized by invisible, impalpable, almost silent acts of terror:

The true long-term threat is further acts of mass terror in comparison with which the memory of the WTC collapse will pale—acts that are less spectacular, but much more horrifying. What about bacteriological warfare, what about the use of lethal gas...? [The WTC explosion was] the last spectacular cry of twentieth-century warfare. What awaits us is something much more uncanny: the spectre of an “immortal” where the attack is invisible—viruses, poisons which can be anywhere and nowhere.57

It is by no means certain that twenty-first-century terrorism will be conducted immaterially and tacitly since recent history has taught us that terrorist campaigns, especially during the second decade of the new century, have given a new meaning to the word “violence” by raising the bar of cruelty and barbarism and eventually
reconfiguring the notion of the real itself. The “new” kind of terror is completely devoid of metaphor and symbol, thus signifying the advent of the horribly Real under the guise of such dehumanizing organizations as the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS).

Mohammed Atta, supposed mastermind of 9/11 attacks
http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/penttbom/aa11/11.htm

4.5 The rise of ISIS: exporting jihadism in a non-ironic age

On Friday, November 13, 2015, Europe experienced its very own “September 11” in Paris, France. That “Black Friday” or “European 9/11,” as it was called, involved the indiscriminate killing of more than 120 innocent citizens whose only crime was that they were having a good time attending a concert or simply having dinner at some of the restaurants of the French capital. The world was shocked to find out that Paris had been struck by a new wave of jihadists whose ruthlessness and barbarity, as it would transpire, was only ambiguously ideological or religious. There were six simultaneous strikes accurately orchestrated, one of which in a music theatre and another just outside the biggest football stadium in France (Stade de France) which was packed with 80,000 people at that moment. The responsibility for the deadly attacks was claimed officially by ISIS, the so-called Islamic “State,” whose aim was to punish France for its participation in the U.S.-led coalition against the organization’s newly-established “caliphate” on Iraqi and Syrian territory. In all, fifteen ISIS terrorists were implicated in the stunning deeds, seven of whom, as it turned out, had carried out suicide attacks leading nearby civilians to their deaths.
Europe had already encountered the ugly face of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism before—in Madrid and London, in 2004 and 2005 respectively—but this was the first time that terrorists had not hit, for instance, public transport during a busy working day to disrupt daily business routines or subvert even the economy of a Western country; rather they aimed for Paris nightlife and the relaxed rhythms of a European capital at the end of the working week (Friday), in what appeared to be a series of hideous acts of casual terrorism. Separate individuals or groups in two or three casually walked into bars and just as casually started shooting at people and killing in cold blood. In a statement that they issued on the following day, ISIS terrorists expressed their disgust at Western pleasures and the intrinsic immorality of the lifestyle of the West, pointing their fingers (as well as guns) at the “capital” of debauchery and decadence—Paris (!) In other words, what was at issue was not simply an outrageous attack of casual terrorism, but also a puritan or moralistic kind of terror which was casually inflicted on unsuspecting “decadent” individuals subjected rightfully to divine justice for their “profligacy.” In an unparalleled sarcastic gesture, the French satiric journal Charlie Hebdo (which had also been hit by Islamists a few months earlier for offending the Prophet Muhammad) announced on its front page two days after the tragedy: “They have weapons? So what? We have champagne!” The journal featured the caricature of a man who was shot at but dripping not blood but champagne—a dig at the fundamentalist aversion to alcohol and a direct comment on Western liberties flaunting their nasty, unhealthy, unethical, but still pleasurable habits of entertainment, intimacy, extroverted-ness, sarcasm and tolerance. The subtext of Charlie Hebdo’s illustration was related to the question of fear when it comes to terrorism: the latter wins when fear conquers all. Apparently, humor overpowers fear as well as terror.

ISIS represents an evolved category of terrorism: one that fuses Islamic law, religion, ideology, myth or even aesthetics. In that respect, it constitutes a new, far from traditionalist, conservative movement. That new wave of international terrorism—an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and a true embodiment of a novel kind of medievalism—would be, in many senses, an upgraded model of terrorism attaching wholly new meanings to the concept of “terror” and “jihad.” If terrorism is usually deterritorialized, in terms of not occupying its very own territory but appropriating the territory of the other as a foreign entity working the demise of that “other,” then the “upgraded” model of ISIS is a deterritorialized entity par excellence (even though it
has acquired, indeed, its own territory, the caliphate, as we will see shortly), in the sense that the majority of its members do not just blend in with dominant Western cultures before they perpetrate their hideous acts; they actually live inside them. Ironically, this new kind of Islamist terror does not depend for its success mainly on the loyalty of its Oriental, Muslim subjects but, rather, on the fascination it has exerted on Western citizens of different nationalities, many of whom seem to have consciously and collectively “defected” to the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq where they receive special “training” after which they return to their home-countries to put their newly-gained “knowledge” into practice—a number of the persons involved in the November 13 attacks in Paris were of French and Belgian nationality. In effect, what we are dealing with here is the absolute implementation of what we call “home-grown” or “Western Islamist” terrorism. If the “clash of civilizations” is still a valid concept it would have to be qualified: “a civilization clashing against its own self” would better describe the current state of affairs in Islamist terror, as we have already explained in the beginning of the chapter where we connected Islamism with the forces of globalization. Placed against the backdrop of globalization, jihad, in the context of ISIS, takes on chameleon-like qualities, adapting to new terrorist constellations and agendas by acquiring the status of an umbrella term which is always ready to legitimize an ever-expanding range of demands that are often too ambiguous and elusive to fulfill even if one wanted to—the contemporary version of jihad is, therefore, already a hybrid entity.

Regardless of the hybrid and pastiche-like qualities of ISIS jihadism, one should refrain from calling it “postmodern.” Postmodernism plays with irony and the symbol, even though it does not embrace them. ISIS terrorism is by no means ironic or symbolic as, for example, was the Al-Qaeda version of it materialized on 9/11. On the contrary, ISIS violence demarcates the coming of the filthy real as an internal, but also external, evil force working not only towards the destruction but also the dehumanization of the human, independently of religion, nation or ideology. If 9/11 constituted “pornographic” violence—one that was meant to be consumed aesthetically and obsessively from up close—the excruciating violence of decapitation, crucifixion, and mutilation constitutes the terrorist equivalent of snuff movies and the beginning of the end of irony. 39

It could be argued that the postmodern espousal of mediated experience and virtual reality in the twentieth century has gradually given way, in the twenty-first
century, to a passion for the real—for instance, passion for witnessing brutal violence as it is expressed nowadays by terrorist activity. A new category of propaganda of the deed arises since the brutality of the terrorist act is prioritized over the religious principles the act is supposedly founded upon: the real emerges as something which is above rational or religious explication of any kind. Islamist fundamentalist terror promotes the real as material rather than metaphysical reality. In this light, the paramilitary army of ISIS exemplifies precisely the onset of the palpably and materially “real.” ISIS has raised the bar for extreme terrorism insofar as it (unknowingly) offers an almost unmediated view of the ruthless and the real (for instance, real decapitations live on camera). In this light, the 9/11 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda did not signify a new or even “real” kind of terrorism insofar as they were orchestrated as something spectacular, therefore, in a sense, fictional. In addition, they were made even more fictional as they were offered through endless TV reruns for our own consumption. By contrast, ISIS might be said to realize what twenty-first-century terrorism probably looks like: a terrible and gory aesthetic which presents, rather than represents, reality as something which is inevitably brutal.

In June 2014, ISIS or ISIL—Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant—a Sunni fundamentalist terrorist organization, took over most of the land in Northern Iraq and Syria, and in the summer of the same year it declared itself “The Islamic State,” having finally inaugurated a full-blown “caliphate” in the area, which had always been what Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden personally were longing for. In short, they have far surpassed all previous Islamist organizations in actually realizing what, in the recent past, had seemed only a utopian dream. ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself “Caliph Ibrahim” of the Islamic State, a caliphate that would occupy the lands of the entire Arab world by smashing the borders—imposed by Imperialist powers at the end of World War I—and eventually expanding upon Western territories. Immediately after establishing the caliphate,

[t]hey began to impose their strict fundamentalist vision: they set up makeshift sharia law courts in which “infidels” (non-Muslims, those who refused to publicly endorse their ideology and even those accused of petty crimes like drinking alcohol) were tried and, in many case, executed; women were forced into marriages and then raped; Christians were publicly crucified and left to die slowly over the course of several days; mass graves were hastily dug and filled with
the (mostly Shia) corpses of Iraqi Security Forces. . . . With every victory ISIS increased in strength, money, military equipment and prestige among their fellow militant Sunni jihadis. They also increased in confidence.\textsuperscript{41}

ISIS is not just the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world, having taken over many oil fields, plundered numerous antiquities from different countries, and stolen billions of dollars. It is also the most barbaric. Al-Qaeda pales compared to it. In fact, Al-Qaeda leadership was so horrified by the practices of ISIS that it renounced its dogma and tactics and finally disavowed its ties with it.\textsuperscript{42} But ISIS is different from as well as superior to any other terrorist group insofar as it has managed to occupy land: it is far from deterritorialized. The fact that it is now a \textit{state} turns automatically its terrorists into “soldiers” and their fundamentalism into a “grander” and a more prestigious and legitimate cause. Still, even as a state, it cannot but enforce state terror upon its own citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Actually, as already explained in the chapter, Jihadist terrorism, first and foremost, turns against Muslims rather than non-Muslims. The idea behind this attitude is that apostates are, supposedly according to the Koran, a worse enemy than infidels. Yet, as we have already said, even the differences between an apostate and a non-apostate are too hazy to discern, thus leaving the jihadist free to interpret religious apostasy as s/he thinks fit.

Although medievalist brutality is built into the structure of ISIS, its members are far from amateurs when it comes to using modern technology and the internet. Far from reaffirming the stereotypical image of the terrorist as an outcast, an underdog of the society, who plots against the regime that keeps her marginalized, the ISIS terrorist may well live on the crest of society, receive University education and thereafter radicalize herself for various (religious and other) reasons. Technology and computers are friends with this kind of terrorist who seems, at any rate, to occupy a space inside and simultaneously outside the systemic order and the status quo, as if fighting the system with the latter’s own means. Technology is very important for ISIS, more than it was for Al-Qaeda, because it constitutes an enormous propaganda weapon, both for recruiting members and disseminating its messages and purposes in order to create fear—the basic, let us not forget, function of terrorism. Intriguingly, ISIS treads the ground between medieval, traditionalist discourse and practice, on the one hand, and sophisticated, ultra-modernist methodology. To put it plainly, it practices brutal decapitations, but it also makes sure that the brutal image gets around
on the net. It crucifies people but it also jokes about it on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It performs beheadings the old “traditional” way—in public—but it may also do it privately in front of a camera, releasing the (always edited) video on YouTube and other platforms for others to witness. On June 13, 2014, ISIS posted a picture of a severed head on Twitter. Along with the message accompanying the picture—reading “This is our football, it’s made of skin”—they placed as hashtag the words “FIFA WorldCup” so that unsuspecting users casually following the FIFA CUP account would be unknowingly exposed to the atrocious image of brutality.43

What strikes one as rather strange is generally how the ISIS “culture” has exonerated the knowledge and extensive use of the social media even though they are products of the West and Western modernity.44 The answer probably lies in that jihadists do not repudiate modernism and technological modernity, nor do they demonize scientific advances; it is “the West” as that “other” category that they are suspicious of, to say the least. They repudiate the West because they, themselves, are precisely the West’s own mutated by-products—besides, many Jihadist terrorists are of Western origin. Paradoxically, although the Islamic State owns territory, it moves around surreptitiously as if it were un-territorialized (rather than deterterritorialized). Consequently, the Islamist fundamentalism that ISIS advocates is potentially “post-Islamist” and “post-fundamentalist” in terms of being a-Islamic or even short of all those “fundamental” qualities that would make it fundamentalist. It appears that contemporary jihadism embraces violence for the sake of violence and on the pretext of rescuing religious fundamentals. The threats to America on Twitter, for instance, emerge as mutations of Al-Qaeda’s original threats towards the U.S. which were often serious attempts at argumentation and were also permeated by a certain religious or ethnic “consciousness.” By contrast, ISIS threats often seem like carnivalesque tributes to Al-Qaeda’s legacy: “We will kill your people and transform America to a river of blood :)!” This message was appended to an irrelevant picture of ten ISIS “fighters” standing before the decapitated head of a Shia (Muslim) soldier—nothing whatsoever to do with American imperialism.45 It might be claimed that the lasting threat against the Superpower has degenerated into a threat extravaganza towards all people and all cultures and civilizations.

ISIS and the Islamic State’s intention is to play into the deep-seated fears hidden in the recesses of human psyche: the fear of annihilation beyond any reasoning hinging on religion, ideology, or politics. One also gets the feeling that the ineffable
violence perpetrated by the terrorist organization needs no justification or cause behind it, and therefore nobody should consider oneself safe because nobody is innocent. This realization might lead us to assume that perhaps there inheres in the whole jihadist universe a yearning for aesthetic destruction, or better, terrorist violence which is at the same time aestheticized. The killing spree by all imaginable means and the resort to extravagant methods of dehumanization point to a ruthless politics without any “depth.” Walter Benjamin’s insight that fascism is the aestheticization of politics is very timely. A politics which is seen from an aesthetic perspective constitutes a (non)politics of fascist destruction. It could be argued, with much reservation, that the Islamic State embodies the spirit of “Islamo-fascism.”

This kind of Islamist fundamentalism endorses the ideology of violence as a message in itself. Violence, in the case at hand, is not a medium; it is the message. In this light, ISIS tactics could be construed as sharing common ground with the dogma of the “propaganda of the deed” in the sense that atrocity and brutality are given priority over the theoretical foregrounding or (non)ideological explication after the (brutal) fact. It is the brutality that creates the politics.

The aesthetic aspect of the terrorists’ self-representation should not be lost on anyone who wants to really comprehend the fascination exerted by terrorist violence on common people and viewers. The graphic representation of execution and decapitation may be at the core of ISIS propaganda, but it is likely not the main component of its aesthetic strategies. The image of a beheaded body is an image of dehumanization and objectification of the human, indeed. However, aside from the uncanny attraction to such a horrendous view (which is usually offered in high definition), there is the (not as uncanny) aesthetic attraction to the image of a handsome fighter and a revolutionary that ISIS unstoppably propagates in order to lure females as well as males from the West into joining their “cause.” A multitude of Western citizens swarmed into Syrian territory keeping that image of beautiful robustness and manliness in mind, hoping that they could lead a life of adventure and real action that might divert them from the apathy, passivity and meaninglessness of modern living. Many of those would certainly have felt as if they were about to get a taste of the real thing, the authentic reality humans were supposed to live in, thereby sensing that they were approaching the sublime—telling themselves “this is it!”—that is, that Real, inaccessible Other (the terror of violence as encapsulated by the figure of the terrorist) which is at once frightening and, paradoxically, terribly attractive. Many
of those citizens have already returned to their home countries; at least, those who could make it back.

The aesthetics of terrorism is inextricably bound up with an excess of the real, namely, the reality of violence. The excess of the real brings into the equation the possibility of death. Most interestingly, in the case of ISIS terrorism, death—the terrorist’s own—is very often not just a possibility: it is a certainty. Suicide attacks for Islamist fundamentalism of the ISIS category may be celebrated as acts of sacrificial heroism (aspiring to attain the, almost Kantian, ideal of Islamist sovereignty) but they are no more than strategic options—killing as many innocents as possible with the minimum of effort—mixed with a touch of an “aesthetic morality”: the magnificent but self-serving cause of going to Paradise and marrying seventy brunettes. Baudrillard has already commented upon the aesthetics of pleasure derived from the very imperative of suicide attacks. He is talking about Al-Qaeda terrorists, but his thoughts are more appropriately applicable to the Islamic State’s methodology:

[T]hese terrorists exchanged their deaths for a place in paradise; their act was not a disinterested one, hence it is not authentic; it would be disinterested only if they did not believe in God, if they saw no hope in death, as is the case with us. . . . There again, then, they are not fighting fair, since they get salvation, which we cannot even continue to hope for. So we mourn our deaths while they can turn theirs into very high-definition stakes.47

From the above we may surmise that there lies an unequivocal drive towards an aesthetics of happiness and self-fulfillment in the mind of the suicide bomber. The Islamist fundamentalist perpetrating a suicide attack is essentially granting herself the right to a pleasurable (material) life in Paradise while denying that right to her victims. This is not, of course, sacrificial heroism or pure madness. This is an act of narcissistic egotism. Nevertheless, such a narcissistic act unfortunately finds admirers (as well as imitators) amongst Western citizens that are still “ uncontaminated” by the virus of deadliness. We who cling to life have the romantic tendency to look up to those who cling to death (even if the latter prefer to die in order to prove that they once “lived”) out of a natural (European) fascination with the figure of the young Romantic hero who ends her own life to protect her ideals—even though at times she does not even know what those ideals are exactly.
What 9/11, the subsequent War on Terror and the rise of ISIS have demonstrated is that terrorism is nearly impossible to defeat since it is already woven into the global, the technological, the modern as well as the aesthetic.

Abu-Bacr-Al Bagdadi, leader of the Islamic State
Notes

1. “Postmodern,” both in its occurrence chronologically after the modern, as well as in its fundamental irrationality or inexplicability.
3. Hoffman, p. 89.
6. Bin Laden repeatedly addressed Muslims in his messages in favor of Jihad and against dissensions amongst them: “Oh Lord, unify the Muslims,” or “praise be to Allah . . . defeat[ing] factionalism.” See “A Declaration of War by Osama bin Laden, Together with Leaders of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders,” August 1996. http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa. Accessed 10 July 2015. From this declaration, one can easily surmise that Laden’s intentions had probably always been maximalist: driving the U.S. out of the Middle East was not his sole purpose. Especially the following excerpt is revealing: “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it . . .” (my emphasis).
8. Al-Qaeda has frequently reissued renewed declarations of jihad against America and the West, which is partly attributable to its assumption that the enemy hasn’t taken its warnings seriously.


15. John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 51. The Muslim Brotherhood operating in Egypt attacked mainly non-Muslims as part of its strategy to establish national independence. The Brotherhood did not go against the political and governmental order but rather played the diplomatic game of establishing links and coalitions with Westernized regimes and modernized governments. This is also the reason why a more fundamentalist and violent branch of the Brotherhood—which supported that the real enemy was the body of apostates within the ostensibly Islamic government rather than a foreign power—broke away from the mother movement. In 1965 members of the Muslim
Brotherhood were executed as they were found guilty of attempting to assassinate Nasser.


24. By “myth,” one does not mean a lie or some false system of assumptions. The term is rather employed to signify the entire body of the unconsciously adopted values and ideologies of Islamist fundamentalism. Those unconscious pseudo-ideologies (on second thought, aren’t all ideologies “fake” in the sense that they are based upon belief and faith rather than reason?) consist of mythic narratives that are partly fictional and partly true. However—and this is infinitely more important—because of their epic and “dramatic” qualities those unconscious ideologies are able to sustain an entire system of religious and metaphysical misconceptions that end up legitimating the exercise of violence and terrorism—by “unconscious” we mean the process of adopting unknowingly false ideological premises based upon whim, erratic feeling, religious faith and subjective emotion rather than upon logical argumentation, critical instinct and in-depth analysis. The inherent irrationality (or, rather, non-rationality) of the powers that underpin political ideology and the relation of those powers to symbolic (fictional) images have been diligently explored.


27. Al-Qaeda terrorists were indoctrinated at an early age in the organization’s worldview. Although they had various ethnic and national backgrounds, most “were middle-class, educated professionals, who had spent much of their adult life in the West. As such, they felt isolated, suspended between the Muslim and Western worlds, belonging to neither” (Randall Law, p. 306). Only mosques around Europe could provide them with some sense of belonging and self-identity. But mosques were usually places where radical clerics taught, who inevitably exposed those Western secular—and hardly knowledgeable in religious matters—Muslims to their own maverick and fundamentalist ideas. The most important feature those youngsters shared was an artificially planted—via brain-washing techniques—eagerness to become “martyrs” by participating in suicide attacks.

28. To this day, it is not absolutely certain that it was the hard core of the terrorist organization that orchestrated the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon. Al-Qaeda was, and still is, a brand name characterizing a multinational terrorist organism functioning more like a loosely-structured federation made up of separate cells that did not exactly “work” on their own, but without necessarily taking direct orders from Osama bin Laden either. The latter finally assumed responsibility for the attacks on 9/11 although at first he had reportedly denied his involvement in it. The beginning of the new century would, amongst other things, reshape the way terrorists viewed their “struggle.” In the twenty-first century, a terrorist group does not go out of its way to reveal immediately whether it was implicated in an attack or not. In some twisted way, the
violence that remains a mystery, an unsolved case, creates a heightened sense of insecurity among the public, or even a sense of awe at the sight of the unexplainable.


31. German composer Stockhausen, for instance, was stunned by the “artistic” or concert-like aspect of the event. He famously said that it was the greatest work of art that the cosmos had ever attested to because of the non-rehearsal of the deed, its massive scale—involving a huge “setting”—and the three thousand “actors” who died at the completion of the concert along with the “directors” who committed suicide at the culmination of the artwork—just like the artist who recedes and lets her work speak for itself and on her behalf. Of course later Stockhausen apologized for making such immoral comments.

32. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, pp. 137-43. We cannot acquit the media and the internet of the important part they play in disseminating violence and imprinting it on people’s unconscious, but also in spreading the terrorist image. Neumann refers to an episode involving a group of British Al-Qaeda supporters in Birmingham. The group would kidnap a British Muslim soldier in order to coerce British Muslims generally into refusing to enlist in the British army. Afterwards, they would behead him in front of a camera and upload the video on youtube to attract a million viewers. Of course, this is not just a case of propaganda through the internet; it is also an opportunity for the murderers to indulge into the spectacle of death. See Neumann, p. 44.

33. Alternatively, both terrorist attacks could be seen as small pieces of a bigger scenario that might be completed in the future through a third attack (?). Part of the terror involved in an incident of extreme violence bears on the unconscious fear that the incident will likely repeat itself in the future with greater intensity.

34. *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 4.


38. In January 2015, Islamists stormed the Journal’s offices killing 12 employees including the editor. Islamists do not exactly excel in grasping metaphor or humor; attaching oneself too closely to the Holy Book may in fact prevent one from being flexible enough to recognize the other’s weakness as a sign of her humanity.

39. At this point I am slightly altering Zizek’s insight that the WTC catastrophe relates to Hollywood catastrophes in the same way that snuff movies relate to regular pornography (see *Welcome to the Desert*, p. 13). Zizek argues that fundamentalist terror is a representation of the passion for the real, bringing up the example of the Red Army Faction in Germany, whose passion for the real turned them from theoretical mavericks into full-blown terrorists (p. 10). I would add that *witnessing* fundamentalist terror is *also* an expression of the same kind of passion.

40. Reestablishing the Caliphate has been a long-standing goal of Sunni Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had this as its ultimate aim.

41. B. Isakhan, “The Iraq Legacies and the Roots of the ‘Islamic State,’” in *The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the ‘Islamic State,*” ed. B. Isakhan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 223. The Islamic State is also responsible for destroying and looting archaeological sites, ancient buildings, statues and centuries-old temples just because those did not conform to their medievalist iconoclastic vision, their extremist reading of the Koran and their totalizing—as well as authoritarian—view of the world.


44. In the aftermath of the Paris outrages on 13 November 2015, the so-called “Islamic Cyber Army” sneered at the Anonymous Activists’ declaration of war against the jihadists. This is definitely a war on a symbolic level, but it is also suggestive of the jihadists’ gaming awareness.

45. Sekulow, p. 38.
46. This argument has indeed been made with regard to Islamist fundamentalism in general. See, John Gray, *Black Mass* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). However, Gray goes beyond that by talking also about “Islamo-Leninism.” Interestingly he thinks of Islamist movements as aspiring to a new world through the exertion of violence. The Islamic state cannot hide its millenarian and eschatological roots by anticipating the coming of a messiah who will reorganize the world. Allegedly, the coming of the messiah will be precipitated through terrorist violence. See Gray, p. 70.


A Declaration of War by Osama bin Laden, Together with Leaders of the World

http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa


http://www.homelandsecurityus.com/bin%20Laden.htm


CHAPTER 5

Art, Philosophy, Literature and Terrorism
5.1 The explosiveness of art: Imagination and the terrorist mind

What is the relationship between performative language and terrorism, or between artistic imagination and the language of extreme violence? Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the masterminds of the 9/11 attacks in New York, provided a rudimentary framework through which we could rethink the connection between symbolic utterance and terrorist violence. His thoughts are here reproduced exactly as they were first expressed

I don’t like to kill people. I feel very sorry they been killed kids in 9/11. What will I do? This is the language. . . . I know American people are torturing us from seventies. . . . I know they talking about human rights. And I know it is against American constitution, against American laws. But they said, every law, they have exceptions, this is your bad luck you been part of the exception of our laws. They got have something to convince me but we are doing the same language.1

What one can understand from Mohammed’s statements is that the terrorist violence that he inflicts upon the U.S. and the West is, in his mind, a meaningful “language” which performs a—more than symbolic—resistance to imperialist and globalizing politics. Terrorism as some kind of performative utterance has a lot to do with the connection between language and literal violence, or between symbolic art and the activism of the terrorist.

Modernity and Postmodernity seem to have injected pain as well as pleasure, terrorist catastrophe as well as creative imagination into the vein of humanity. Still, it remains too hard to even insinuate that there might be a single link connecting radical violence and art, or destruction and the artistic mind. One may concede that there is a symbolic, metaphorical, connection between art and terrorism. Original art, for example, is imaginative and creative. Terrorism, in a similar fashion, almost has the obligation to be imaginative in order to be “successful”—kill as many people as possible, thus send a message by creating an unforgettable impact.

But even if we admit that there might be a metaphorical affinity between terrorist conception and artistic conception, we are positive that there has to be no real structural link between terrorism and art despite the stereotypical concession that
creation’s counterpart is destruction and vice versa, to which one could retort even more stereotypically: “Yes, but art creates and terrorism destroys!” I am problematizing precisely that idea by inquiring into the relationship between creativity and radical violence, namely, exploring the affinity between radical imagination that breaks artistic and social norms, therefore “terrorizing” its own nature as art through entering the realm of reality, and terrorism. The basic question to be answered is twofold: “Does radical imagination make inherently ‘terrorist’ claims?”; “does such an imagination preempt or prefigure (future) acts of terrorism and real scenes of catastrophe?” I will employ Michel de Certeau’s vision of the World Trade Center in New York in his essay “Walking in the City” (from his 1974 book The Practice of Everyday Life) to show how radical imagination may open conceptual spaces for violence and destruction rather than creation and art.

Written, of course, long before the 9/11 attacks, “Walking in the City” constitutes a semi-conscious or subconscious visualization or conception of the World Trade Center (WTC) as a site of potential, man-made or not, catastrophe. De Certeau’s radical imagination anticipates the future collapse of the WTC but at the same time builds upon that collapse to underpin a new geography of liberated architectural space. What could not have been anticipated, however, is the underlying “explosiveness” of the text that retrospectively proved to be almost reality-conferring, judging from what happened on 11 September 2001. Through the lens of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the fantasized crumbling of the Twin Towers, in de Certeau, could be a symptom of a trauma that had not occurred yet, a pre-traumatic symptom, so to speak; alternatively, it could be seen as the trauma that people had fantasized about, which subsequently found its real symptom in the occurrence of 9/11. Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s first Seminar, Slavoj Zizek addresses the symptom as a “meaningless trace” of a future trauma, or better, of a trauma that will have been. Seen this way, the symptom will only acquire significance via the occurrence of a future act as well as the retrospective analysis of that future act:

The Lacanian answer to the question: From where does the repressed return? is therefore, paradoxically: From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is, . . . in working through the symptom we are precisely “bringing about the past”—we are
producing the symbolic reality of the past, long-forgotten traumatic events.\textsuperscript{2}

Zizek is indebted to Lacan’s affirmation that the unconscious is constituted by “imaginary fixations which could not have been assimilated. . . . [Therefore, the unconscious] is something which will be realized in the Symbolic, or [something which] \textit{will have been}” through symbolic analysis.\textsuperscript{3} In other words, the act of fantasizing about a certain kind of destruction constitutes an “imaginary fixation” which can only be assimilated or made meaningful \textit{after} the fact, in retrospect, namely, after a similar or the very same destruction has occurred in reality: it is in that sense that the fantasy of terror \textit{will have been}.

We may argue that September 11 is that traumatic act which provides the retroactive analysis of the symptom produced by Michel de Certeau in his 1974 essay. Without the real trauma—9/11—de Certeau’s fantasy of destruction hardly makes sense, being simply a “meaningless trace” or symptom. In the essay, the author provides us with a glimpse of the so-called “Twin Towers” as the excessive articulation of a paroxysmal city which reflects upon itself “in a constantly exploding universe”:

Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. . . . On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.\textsuperscript{4}

De Certeau here argues that New York, in opposition to European or other cities, always manages to reinvent itself by casting aside the shell of former architectural, cultural and social achievements, therefore turning itself into some kind of city of a constant future, that is, a city of a future that keeps coming under the guise of a present that is never fully there. One can discern excess, paroxysm and explosion in the New York proposed by the author who looks at the city as a universe which is reconfiguring itself unstoppably using an amalgamation of glass, steel, concrete and oceanic water, a universe which is spearheaded by the loftiest metonyms in the
world, the Twin Towers, composing “a gigantic rhetoric of excess.” By pointing to de Certeau’s insight that the Twin Towers constitute excessive “rhetoric” one cannot seriously insinuate that he predicted, let alone provoked, 9/11. The terrorist attack was not already written in the stars in a deterministic fashion; neither was it demanded by Michel de Certeau in a god-like manner. However, one might safely claim that the early articulation of an implied catastrophe had opened a conceptual space for imagining a real catastrophe.

Zizek touches upon such a conceptual space by making a reference to the uncanny similarity between the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and a fictional foreshadowing of this event in an 1898 novella called Futility, or the Wreck of the Titan, written by Morgan Robertson. Robertson writes about a huge ship called Titan which sinks after it hits an iceberg in the Atlantic on an April night, exactly like the real-life Titanic a few years later (!) Zizek posits that “precisely as a shock, [the] sinking [of the Titanic] arrived at its proper time—‘the time was waiting for it’: even before it actually happened, there was already a place opened, reserved for it, in fantasy-space.” Likewise, “the time was waiting for” 9/11, it “arrived at its proper time” since there was already a place reserved for it in the “fantasy-space” yielded by de Certeau’s uncanny anticipation/visualization of the disaster in “Walking in the City,” where the symptom of the traumatic experience is configured before even the actual experience occurs. Thus, the terrorist strike itself retroactively elaborates on the author’s earlier conceptualization of terror as a future anterior—the aforementioned “will have been.”

De Certeau is a poetic philosopher. “Walking in the City” constitutes a sample of both, poetic philosophy and philosophical poetry. At the beginning of the essay he has already treated the reader to an overwhelming bird’s eye view of New York City: “Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals.” This visual roller coaster typical of de Certeau’s creative/imaginative philosophy seems, on the surface, to extol the spectacularity of the city, but what it truly does is foreshadow the Icarian flight and subsequent fall turning utopia into dystopia later in the text: “To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. . . . An Icarus
flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. . . .”

These phrases by no means illustrate the author’s enthusiasm over the gigantic mass of steel and glass called WTC; rather, they propose that to be lifted to the summit of the WTC is to erase the possibility of real life and true human existence by resorting to fiction, a fictional presence that should not be there. In essence, he wants the towers “down,” as they are not real.

A radical kind of imagination permeates de Certeau’s thought. His text imagines or prefigures a New York that is flattened out, no verticalities whatsoever. This image, let us be reminded here, goes against the skyscraper building spree of the 60s, a time-period that rendered possible such sententious articulations as: “Vertical is to live, horizontal is to die.” According to this motto, the elimination of verticality verges on death. De Certeau states the opposite. He imagines a city without the paroxysmal excess of the two highest buildings in the world (when this text was written, the Twin Towers were still the highest structures worldwide), a city that has already had its share in metaphysical utopia in the form of an architecture that points to the sky and the inaccessible. In other words, he covets the radical transformation of New York from a city that abounds in immobile, thus unproductive, places to a city whose residents or strollers create ever new spaces by continually inventing new routes, thus rewriting the “text” of its architecture and road or building formation. De Certeau’s imagination fantasizes about the terrorizing demolition of everything that stands out and prevents the everyday from evolving into something new. Such a kind of imagination “terrorizes” place, as we know it, insofar as it calls for a real, not imaginary, destruction of presumptuous symbolism or metaphor and the automatic creation of different space cells, different spaces that will be written out by those who walk around the city rather than fly over it.

De Certeau has famously made a distinction between place and space. In “Spatial Stories,” he maintains that place “is . . . an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.” On the other hand, space “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. . . . Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.” In short, space implies an indication of voluntary instability. Earlier, in “Walking in the City,” New York City has been conceptualized as a place that keeps reinventing itself by not playing “on all its pasts” like Rome, for
instance. Such a place “forgets” it has a past, thus dissociating itself from immobility and pointing continually to the future, to a constant reshuffling of the architectural cards, so to speak; simply put, to continuous mobility.

A place that unstoppably restructures itself by dismissing any idea of pastness is not a “place” any more, but rather constitutes “space.” Since place indicates stability as well as “an instantaneous configuration of positions,” and space is produced “by the operations that orient it, situate it . . . in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs,” it follows that the essence of New York lies in endlessly rethinking its geography—by reorganizing its architectural places as spaces, and by pulling down historical landmarks or symbolic emblems that signify stagnation, death and immobility. The imaginary (but utterly imaginative) demolition of the embodiment of deadly verticality par excellence—the WTC—serves the purpose of terrorizing immobile, symbolic, stagnant place into ever-moving spatial configurations that live up to the expectations of the stroller, the space maker, the organizer of an horizontal, rather than vertical futurity. Arguably, in order to realistically acquaint oneself with the city, one has to “unfold” or flatten it out by erasing any privileged, panopticon-like positions/views that pretend to contain, rationalize, or offer a grand metaphysical narrative of it (of the city). The fantasy of bringing the Twin Towers down represents the symptom of the wish to create more spatial itineraries as well as less fictional practices of living and knowing. Somehow, one is obliged to wipe out the excess of artificial verticality which hinders the human viewpoint from widening the scope of its interests. Gradually, there emerges a need for a radically violent transformation of city geography.

The conflict “place versus space,” de Certeau informs us, predominates also at the level of the New York residence. New York citizens, when asked to, tend to provide descriptions of their residencies based upon a “touring” rather than “mapping” mentality. They do not map out their home by letting people know, for instance, that the living room is next to the kitchen, but rather provide a “tour” of it: “you turn right and come into the living room.” In other terms, the description or appreciation of place, the residence, is comprehended through a spatial configuration of it: The house does not exist “objectively” on its own but via the human activities occurring inside it. Those activities turn an artificial place (a sheer building or construction) into natural space (developing specific human habits or itineraries inside the house) thereby giving meaning to the idea of actually living in a house.10 The
concept of touring rather than mapping the New York house allegorizes the bigger issue of *touring* around (instead of simply *mapping out*) New York City. If NYC points to a constant future, that is because one can only “tour” around it by losing oneself in perpetual peregrination (an activity that can open up unknown spaces) rather than mapping out its “instantaneously configured” spots or immobile places that are nothing but symbol-laden. What de Certeau seems to be saying is that anything as lofty and full of symbolism as the WTC runs counter to the spatializing drive of the New York resident or stroller and thus has to be radically rethought.

The Twin Towers are a synecdoche of the larger environment of the so-called panorama-city:

> Is the immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist. . . . The panorama-city is a “theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.11

The panorama-city is only a simulation, an artificial replication of reality that is made possible if one is oblivious of (space-making) practice. If the practice of space making does justice to the real as the latter was *meant* to be experienced, and at the same time, the idea of the panorama-city is only an illusion, “an optical artifact,” it follows that living and acting within the domain of palpable reality presupposes the elimination or erasure of the “facsimile,” of the “voyeur-god,” to use de Certeau’s terminology, and the re-establishment of authentic living which is not based upon oblivion but upon a true understanding of human practice. The call for the overthrow of the king or the “voyeur-god” and the substitution of original existence for the copy or inauthentic existence is a call for re-humanizing practiced life in the city as well as an expression of the demand for a romantic re-appropriation of space (so far taken over by such optical artifacts as lofty skyscrapers) by walkers or strollers capable of subverting the fixedness of place by means of discovering ever-new routes and geographical practices.

The romantic imperative for the replacement of “kingly” authority (namely, the WTC) with “democratic” spatiality, which puts ordinary humans back into the picture of the city of New York, triggers a revolution against the hegemony of artificial verticality and in favor of natural horizontality which makes no claim to
colonizing space through privileging panoramic views or standpoints. Such a romantic demand is potentially a “terrorist” demand in the sense that it “terrorizes,” in a way, the established order of place fixity as well as the symbolic image/law of the dwarfinig Tower—or, rather, the Tower as the imagistic symbol. In essence, de Certeau’s imaginative spirit promises unconsciously the violent transformation of New York place, as is shown also by the specific choice of words that he makes in “Walking in the City”: such words as “exploding” or phrases like “throwing away previous accomplishments,” as early symptoms of a future terrorist trauma, could point to an unconscious, or not, attempt to merge the literal into the symbolic, the actual into the imaginary or potential. His poetic rationale (poetic, in the ancient Greek sense of “making”) is, ironically, creative and destructive simultaneously. In fact, his philosophy seems creative because it allows for the possibility of destruction.

De Certeau’s phraseology is symptomatic of a traumatic reality that is not ripe yet, which is probably why that reality/trauma is presented as fiction in the first place. With 9/11, though, that “fiction” turned real, as the initially meaningless symptoms of terrorist fantasy preempted, in a Lacanian way, the real trauma, namely the terror-event. Does that mean that de Certeau, in his 1974 essay, talks about something “real” all along the line? Regardless of whether the answer to this question is “yes” or “no,” there is no doubt that he has retroactively managed to open up a conceptual space for the future “flourishing” of a terrorist event. Recent criticism has tackled the author’s eerie early futuristic insights regarding the possibility of destroying the Towers, but without necessarily putting its finger on them. For example, one critic focuses on how Mikhail Bakhtin’s use of the concept of the chronotope (translating as “time-space”) bears on September 11 as it was anticipated in de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” as well as other fictional representations of terrorist catastrophes. She claims that “while Bakhtin maintained that ‘[o]ut of the actual chronotopes of our world . . . emerge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the text,’ there are indications that with the September 11 chronotope the created texts preceded the reality.” Following the “life-imitating-art” aestheticism model, she addresses the reversal of the chronotope in the sense that 9/11 (Life) allegedly simply imitated, or drew upon, artistic material connected with fictional representations of evil (Art), but she never accounts for that reversal and never makes allowances for the possibility that art and imagination merely clear up already existent space for the realistically unthinkable but not improbable.
Another critic, Marla Carlson, eloquently raises the question of the “conception of possibility,” “which is to project an image of the real back into the past before its realization, when it was but one of a number of possibilities.” According to Carlson, that kind of projection constitutes the work of memory—one could say “revisionary” memory, but then again, isn’t all memory “revisionary”? Our sense of the present infiltrates our image of the past or the fictional, in the same way that our sense of the past filters our image of the present or the real. Thus, as Carlson might imply, the terrorist images of 9/11 filter retrospectively our interpretation of “Walking in the City” by projecting terror back onto the surface of the text. Likewise, de Certeau’s opening a conceptual space for unprecedented terrorism filters our experience of 9/11. One’s sense of the fictional past turns out to be inseparable from one’s sense of the future real. In a way, that is, de Certeau’s radical fantasy related to the possibility of destroying the Twin Towers is an unconscious acknowledgment (or symptom) of the certainty that the real trauma (the terrorist attack) has yet to come, that there is a place reserved for it in the future. The fantasy seems implicated in carrying out the real deed; the former makes the latter happen by broaching the conceptual space for it. The work of radical imagination ends up spilling over into the realm of the real, but without, paradoxically, creating the real.

It could be argued that an imagination which is not exclusively that—imaginary—functions as some kind of terrorist in art and life to the extent that it stops imagining and starts acting in the world. We certainly don’t expect, or want, an artwork to exceed its artificial status. Who would like to see, for instance, fictional or cinematic evil come alive? We generally need a representation to remain a representation rather than entering the realm of the real, so that we can continue to appreciate it aesthetically and, more important, safely. The beauty of destruction presupposes that destruction is symbolic, but the poet/philosopher’s radical imagination deconstructs the so-far discernible barrier between the fictional and the real, thereby allowing real life to contaminate the symbolic world and the symbol to contaminate reality. Following de Certeau’s own imagistic insights, reality called for the destruction of the Twin Towers: 9/11 did happen and it cannot possibly be undone. The symbolic destruction was therefore made into a literal one, and what gives de Certeau’s text its subversive thrust is its ability to point to a radical future where New York reinvents itself by not building upon its previous accomplishments or heritage “like ancient Rome.” The forbidden image of the falling towers has finally
swooped in on us in an unexpected but also creative fashion, thus rendering a fantasy (which was necessary for the author) a full-fledged reality. It could be argued that “Walking in the City,” in retrospect, has managed to terrorize us by flaunting its realistic-turned-real dimension and potential. Art and poetic writing are simply poetic and artistic no more then: they have become literally true.

De Certeau’s text provides us even with details of the terrorizing images that we, as spectators, would later view petrified on our TV sets: Scenes where people frantically jump out of the WTC in the open space will always be imprinted in our memories or our collective unconscious as modern citizens. He asks rhetorically: “Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below?” According to Sharon Paz, a New York project artist who collected pictures of real WTC jumpers on September 11 and glued them to the windows of the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in Queens, “falling is one of the basic human fears,” and apparently, opting for that shows the lack of any other choice. If falling is a primal fear which is repressed in the darkest recesses of the human psyche because it is the source of death par excellence, falling from the Towers, for de Certeau, takes on the meaning of becoming “normal” and humanized anew. To be unable to see down below is to return to the everyday, whereas to be able to see the crowds “from on high” represents an artificial—therefore unnecessary—possibility that transforms the human into a utopian god. The Towers “construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility. . . .” In this light, to give in to the primal fear of falling, to actually fall into the dark space, that is, is to help retain the complexity of the city, its unrepresentability as an “opaque mobility” as there will not be an all-seeing reader/spectator any more: “Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface. . . .”

Falling headlong into empty space proves to be a creative symptom; a symptom of a future trauma (a pre-traumatic symptom) which is associated with a terrorist destruction of architectural stagnation. It befalls a rebel of the imagination to fantasize about architectural or geographical non-totality; a romantic terrorist yearning to fight against the hegemony of immobile structure and perfect, totally visible, order. When city space escapes total visibility, it offers itself to us as an unfamiliar otherness which resists conceptualization and architectural “closure.” It
could be said that de Certeau plays on “falling” as a basic source of human terror as well as a means through which the citizen will be reborn as a space maker rather than a place dweller; or as someone who, far from being bound by the immobility of place, will make up new trajectories, unearthing the aforementioned strangeness in the everyday world of the city/place. Of course, to be reborn, one has to die first in one way or another. De Certeau’s imaginative call for the production of ever new spaces that mock verticality contains seeds of radically violent action. To willfully fall from a lofty tower is to mock architectural verticality. But especially in a post-9/11 world, the idea of even a metaphorical fall from a Western skyscraper would definitely ring as a real fall, in the same manner in which the horrific and very real terrorist hit began as a symbolic strike against world economy and American hegemony as embodied by the WTC.

Could the unprecedented image of the 9/11 hit mark the sweet revenge of imaginary or fictional terror that will not tolerate framing any longer? Are imagination and creative artistry in de Certeau’s essay so close to being deemed authentic on account of the fact that they are going beyond the symbolic by entering the domain of the literal and real? The inauguration of an era of literality or “new literalism” has already been put on the table of twenty-first-century criticism. It has been argued, for example, that right after the shocking attacks of 9/11 “ironic postmodern art would disappear from the scene,” letting figurative and forthright expression have its “fling.” Well, if the terrorist hit was immediate, brutal, and live on TV, why shouldn’t any human response to it (including artistic responses) be just as raw, explicit and utterly un-ironic?

In this artistically “explosive” context, de Certeau waits till the end of his essay to ignite his own cannon aiming at creating space through destroying place. To establish his “mobile” city, a space of continuous mobility, he invokes Valerie Kandinsky’s notorious dream-image: “a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation.” The image of perfect order is unnaturally replaced by another image, that of perfect disorder and architectural destruction. What is terrifying here is how the metaphorical spirit of Kandinsky’s dream breaks into a crude and brutal reality of destruction. “All the rules of architecture” go down the drain by a certain virus, a microbe, turning everything into chaos by its sheer incalculability. Isn’t that what amounts to a new (artistic?) literalism which would defy postmodern irony? In advance, both Kandinsky
and de Certeau have demolished in an imaginary and imaginative fashion all the World Trade Centers of the world, except that reality and the literal have come back to haunt them. Alternatively, could it be that the demolition at hand was never meant to be purely symbolic?—a possibility that would point to the potential lethality as well as creativity of poetic imagination. In either case, the “explosive device” used by de Certeau is similar to Kandinsky’s uncanny architectural image that produces free imaginative space through destruction, so that new itineraries are possible.

A radical and terrorizing reconfiguration of the architecture of the city through an activation of micro-powers undermining its functionalist organization seems to be at stake. De Certeau maintains that

the rationalization of the city leads to its mythification in strategic discourses, which are calculations based on the hypothesis or the necessity of its destruction in order to arrive at a final decision. Finally, the functionalist organization, by privileging progress (i.e., time), causes the condition of its own possibility—space itself—to be forgotten; space thus becomes the blind spot in a scientific and political technology.  

Strategic discourse or strategy, according to de Certeau, is the language of Power, as contrasted to tactic which is the method or language of micro-powers “combining themselves outside the reach of panoptic power.” But the employment of strategy means that Power is involved in some kind of war against minor, unidentified, space-making tactical forces threatening to corrode, from the inside, the basic structures of the city as “concept” or strategic discourse. This is not a conventional war that is conducted between two equal and fully visible forces or parties; far from it, it is a conflict between visible Power (what de Certeau calls “the rationalization of the city”) and the Power’s very own body which is already infested with various non-readable entities whose sole purpose is to annihilate the city as a form of rationalization. In the same way that terrorist organizations hardly lay claim to a certain “official” or formal identity, micro-powers shun identification. In effect, it becomes much easier for them to undermine or destroy the main organism or official identity of Power (namely, the City as concept) from within, that is, by gnawing at its separate strategic functions like a microbe that feeds off the flesh of the human body in order to make it revert to its previous, more primitive condition. At the same time, the “terrorist” microbe has to
deny its own existence, for it only manages to operate effectively by not making itself known and by remaining a shadow enemy.

Astonishingly, for de Certeau, the rationalization of the city presupposes the necessity of the city’s destruction, otherwise how can its mythification in strategic discourses be legitimated? The role of the microbe or micro-power is seen as liberating for the author insofar as the microbe inaugurates ever-new spatial practices within the realm of the city and opens up new possibilities of creativity and existence. De Certeau plays with terrorist terminologies when he speaks of the liberating power of the microbe or the “micro.” Admittedly, through acts of destruction or annihilation, terrorism usually aspires (or claims it aspires) to create something new, or reconstruct an older form of existence which was supposedly repressed by the current one. Likewise, de Certeau talks about “suppression,” “liberation,” “regulation” and “illegitimacy” in a single breath: “[O]ne can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress. . . . [O]ne can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy. . . .”22 Thus, a new poetic geography has to be established on top of the previous one, on top of “the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning.”23 That poetic geography constitutes “liberated space” that can actually be “occupied.”24

The author creates a fantasy of revolution against, and liberation from, the tyranny of panoptic administration. That fantasy encapsulates the author’s vision of an exploding reconstruction of city geography through an alternative version of radical violence which creates spaces rather than destroying places. At issue is neither catastrophe nor progress, according to de Certeau:

Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay. . . .25

Inextricably bound up with the question of radical imagination as inherently terrorist-like is the presence of image as a shocking entity. Image is the “language”
that the unconscious uses in order to process traumatic or extremely violent events (such as terrorist attacks). In this lens, images can be likened to dreams. De Certeau’s essay “Walking in the City” can be said to address such a dream/image of creation through architectural destruction. To dream of an orderly city which is instantaneously shattered by an unknown but massive force, or alternatively, to dream of falling from the Twin Towers (or crashing into them?) is to produce an unprecedented image which defamiliarizes the trite and commonplace and leads to the radical rethinking of the image as static, conventional picture. The radical image strikes us, in retrospect, as dangerously pointing to radical violence, like, for instance, the violence of terrorism.

Image, on second thought, is the language of terrorism. In fact, terrorist activity without a picture of it, its image, is next to nothing. In a way, a terrorist act is preceded—therefore determined—by its very image. Michel de Certeau relies upon the terrifying image of falling from the Towers to radically rethink architectural space. Ironically, in his effort he appropriates the (up to then, forbidden) fantasies of potential terrorists (in this case, of course, the fantasy would be the trauma, not the symptom). If terrorist image constitutes the terrorist event (as Baudrillard, for instance, claims), the fantasy of destruction in de Certeau’s mind empowers his vision (as well as the practice) of a radical, terrorist, reconfiguration of city space.

Is radical violence so close to imagination and the artistic mind? Michel de Certeau’s poetic imagination appears to be inherently (that is, structurally) destabilizing, de-constructive (in the original sense of literally or symbolically destroying architectural construction), and eventually, rather violent in terms of violating and terrorizing art or imagination out of its “normal” proportion and representational nature. The image he provides, that of falling from the WTC into the empty space underneath, illustrates benign aspects of radical imagination but also conjures (memories of) the malignant face of radical terrorism. In a way, that extraordinary image is asking us to rethink the possibility not only of looking at terror through the lens of imagination and art, but also of looking at imagination and art through the lens of terror.

For de Certeau, creation and destruction are not mutually exclusive; they are rather interdependent and complementary to each other insofar as architectural horizontality can only come about through a creative destruction of immobile, vertical place. Imagination may tread upon terrorist territory in the same way that terrorism
may frequently draw upon the work of imagination to achieve its goals. In fact, terrorism or radicalism can be imaginative precisely because imagination can be terrorist and extremely radical. De Certeau could be a potential “terrorist” insofar as he revolutionizes the way we look at architectural space by discerning fissures in the edifice of place. In this light, authentic is the art that implicates the spectator in the artistic process. Moreover, it is the art that goes where no art has gone before, in the sense that it enters reality rather than limits itself to the realm of the fictional or fictitious. Authentic art, or radical imagination, is able to terrorize us out of our complacent posture as distanced critics and into the realization that the artwork could just as well pose a real threat to our very lives. It could be inferred that a really valuable artistic statement bears on the question of the real affinity between terrorism and imagination, or imaginative art.

Art’s intention is not necessarily to demonstrate to us the harmoniousness and serenity of the world; it is also to underline the maliciousness of it. If creation’s counterpart is destruction, then, art, by entering the realm of a malicious world, becomes destructive and malicious too. De Certeau’s radical imagination demands the erasure of verticality in New York City. Such a call has the ability to terrorize the post-9/11 reader of “Walking in the City” as it conjures horrific memories from the recent past. Still, does that make it a “malicious” and “evil” call? The answer is negative insofar as de Certeau, as a poet-philosopher, looks to a non-conceptual image of terrorist catastrophe of place for a new interpretation of geographical and architectural space. The vision/image of a demolished World Trade Center, as implied in his thought, comments upon the possibility for an alternative version of radical violence, namely, a version of it as an ultimately creative rather than destructive force.

Simultaneously, de Certeau’s poetic and highly imaginative writing turns what was originally considered to be solely imaginary into a full-fledged reality for future readers—an example of how authentic imagination can breathe life into fictive entities. Paradoxically, the author’s imaginative art preempts the terrorist “destructibility” of the Twin Towers. “Walking in the City” transforms the ordinary activity of walking into the most revolutionary act that can be performed within the limits of the contemporary city. In such a context, “walking” may constitute “terrorist” action which breaks the rules of immobile verticality and stagnant symbolism. By flirting with the image and language of extreme violence, de Certeau manages to make a strong case for the reconstruction of city space by means of a
symbolic destruction of the city’s immobile structures. But how “symbolic” is symbol in a terror-afflicted world of pure literality and bluntness, where even art envies the appeal of reality and prefers to identify with presence rather than representation, the real rather than the fictional? In a Lacanian fashion, one might conclude by saying that it is not the symbol that is the symptom of reality, but the opposite: it is the real that is the symptom of the symbol. 

5.2 From Joseph Conrad to Mohsin Hamid: terror in the novel, the novel as terror

As we have shown so far, terrorism is inextricable from language, symbolism and aesthetics. Terrorists always target an audience and the strategies that they employ are usually highly communicative and symbolic. An act of terror, to the extent that it appeals to its audience’s senses by creating fear, terror, and the feeling of insecurity, may well be seen as an aesthetic act of violence (or an act of aesthetic violence). Moreover, a terrorist act might also constitute a radically “artistic” one for some people who would discern in such an act a shock-value or the element of novelty or unexpectedness usually associated with a novel artwork or even a new literary sensibility. In this lens, a quality of “literariness” is potentially inherent in a terrorist strike insofar as the perpetrator bestows upon those receiving the terrorist message the task of interpreting its meaning as well as appreciating the harshness and newness of the strike.

If terrorism flirts with literature, it is hardly surprising that fiction, especially the novel, has traditionally taken an enormous interest in terrorism. From the late nineteenth century onwards, novelists had always been fascinated with the figure of the terrorist. In The Princess Casamassima (1885), Henry James portrays a working-class man, Hyacinth Robinson, who, frustrated at the social inequality and injustice of his time, decides to take part in revolutionary action. However, when it comes to actually inflicting terrorist violence by carrying out an assassination he realizes he cannot go through with it. Feeling that he is trapped between the demands of his terrorist comrades and the harshness of the law he ends up committing suicide. James’
point is that the terrorists and the government are supplementary to each other and prove to be just as adamant and cruel to humanity. Joseph Conrad’s masterpiece *The Secret Agent* (1907) provides a more elaborate and nuanced description of terrorism by featuring different gradations of it and alluding to the idea that terrorists are, in many ways, complicit with the counter-terrorist agencies and authorities bent on destroying them. The novel is about an anarchist plot to bomb the Observatory at Greenwich and is based on a real incident—the accidental death of Martial Bourdin, an anarchist, in Greenwich, London, in 1894. The tricky part in the story is that the bombing had been ordered by a Russian official at the London embassy as a means of coercing the British authorities into adopting stricter and harsher measures against anarchists and revolutionaries, many of whom were of Russian origin. The British had to somehow stop giving asylum to political dissidents from Eastern countries. Conrad, that is, gives an account of a classic case of state-sponsored terrorism: by provoking a terrorist outrage against a marvel of science—the Greenwich Observatory—Russia would paradoxically manage to contain the threat posed by many of its own terrorists (that were exiles in Britain): “In Conrad’s world, governments and terrorists are morally bankrupt, each wholly deserving of the other.”

In the following scene, Mr Vladimir, the aforementioned embassy official, tries to persuade Mr Verloc—an anarchist who is also a double agent—that to make a revolution what is needed is much more than issuing revolutionary pamphlets and theorizing anarchy:

“What we want is to administer a tonic to the Conference in Milan,” he said, airily. “Its deliberations upon international action for the suppression of political crime don’t seem to get anywhere. England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. . . . A series of outrages . . . executed here in this country; not only *planned* here . . . [this is what is needed]. These outrages need not be especially sanguinary . . . but they must be sufficiently startling—effective. . . . A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive. . . . [W]hat is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible . . . almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes.”
Vladimir’s exhortations sound uncannily up-to-date if seen against the backdrop of the War on Terror and the ensuing restrictions imposed on individual rights and liberties. What the official has in mind is the equivalent of a 9/11 (“a tonic to the Conference in Milan”) that could work as a pretext for monitoring citizens’ lives so closely as to reveal potential terrorist identities or tendencies. In the background of *The Secret Agent* lies a period of twenty years, from 1881 to 1901, during which the first modern wave of terror in Western Europe makes its appearance with the assassination of statesmen of different nationalities. However, what looms larger in the horizon of the novel is the 1860s Russian subculture connected with the first generation of terrorism in the Czarist empire. Even though Conrad uses the “West” as the setting of his story, he seems more preoccupied with the question of the “East” insofar as he critiques the tendency to see evil as necessarily emanating from the outside, the non-Western other. In many ways, the demonization of the Russian East in the beginning of the twentieth century—envisioning it as incomprehensible, dark, and fanatic—resembles the demonization, at the turn of the twenty-first century, of the Islamic East as almost inevitably uncontrollable, irrational and terrorist.

Conrad’s novel might be taken to be an allegory of today’s fear of the intruder, the foreigner, or the illegal immigrant. In the globalized world, immigrants are simultaneously welcomed and rejected, a double gesture symptomatic of the semi-existental gap our world has fallen into. On the one hand, the laws of hospitality require an empathic and sympathetic attitude towards migrants, and on the other, such an empathy is interspersed with spontaneous moments of pure terror at the sight of the unknown: “[T]error, migration, and globalization are not randomly linked,” while “fear of migrants and illegal immigration has turned out to be one of the most consistent terror effects of all” because it “fabricates a dominant relation between Western states and terror...” The Western European fear of the Russian migrant as a potential terrorist must have occupied Conrad’s mind at the time of writing *The Secret Agent*, given that only two years before its publication, in 1905, the Aliens Act was passed, the first immigration legislation in Britain which “marked the beginning of the end of Britain’s long history of being an open place of refuge for refugees and political exiles from Europe.” The Act was “primarily directed not against terrorists but the large numbers of Russian and East European Jews who had been settling in great numbers in the East End of London.”
When Mr Vladimir asks for “outrages” that would be executed “here in this country” rather than just “planned here,” he is actually dictating that terror not be a distant spectacle of the exotic East any more but rather brought shockingly closer to the complacent Western bourgeoisie by a startling, and thus effective hit. In fact, the hit should allegedly be not only startling but also absurd and “unthinkable” as if no explanation could be found for it. The more unthinkable and irrational is the attack the more terrifying and overwhelming are its effects on the public. Destruction becomes more “sublime” if it occurs for the very sake of the destructive act, indeed if it goes beyond political violence or even self-legitimating terrorism. The unthinkable strike should not be directed against a politician, a venue of art or a religious symbol, according to Mr Vladimir: such acts would fail to make an impression by precisely being commonplace, far from unprecedented and rather easy to read. By contrast, an attack on a scientific marvel would spark horror and outrage by its abstruseness and non-rational dimension. As he says, “I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy.” The attack against the Observatory would consequently be more horrific by being outrageously unjustifiable or unjust.

Verloc, predictably, did not go through with the terrorist act himself but got someone else to do it for him: his own wife’s brother, Stevie, who was mentally challenged and absolutely clueless about the packaged bomb given to him by Verloc. Ironically, Stevie tripped over, fell and was instantly killed in what could be seen as one of the first instances of suicide bombing illustrated in literature. Conrad comments through a Police Inspector—Inspector Heat—upon the (accidental) self-detonation as an act of an inconceivably immediate and instantaneous death, or rather, one of a deadly immediacy: “The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty. . . . Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous!” What the inspector finds impossible to assimilate is precisely the instantaneity of Stevie’s death rather than the death itself. How does a body become “a heap of nameless fragments” in a split-second? The process of an automatic disintegration seems too elusive and unpresentable to a logical mind. I am employing here Lyotard’s idea of unpresentability to signify the heterogeneity between instantaneous death and rational experience. Lyotard would claim that once you try to understand the former through
the latter, you reduce it to a common and thus forgettable kind of sight or experience—which is probably what Inspector Heat eventually does. At any rate, following Lyotard, the imaginative faculties are incapable of doing justice to the sheer sublimity of the notion of instantaneous destruction, while the ruthless cruelty Heat senses is connected with the fact that such a kind of unfamiliar death feels even more inhumane and horrible than a normal and “ordinary” one—hence the “sympathy,” not unlike fear, felt by the inspector.38

The most enigmatic figure of terrorism illustrated in The Secret Agent is not Verloc or his fellow anarchists who are, after all, presented as grotesque caricatures of the typical terrorist, unable to really make a difference or spark a revolution. It is rather the dark figure of the Professor that ushers the reader into the grim and inexplicable realm of ruthless terrorism as an overwhelming force which exceeds reason or logic. Conrad gives an insightful account of the Professor’s mentality and state of mind:

The extreme, almost ascetic purity of his thought, combined with an astounding ignorance of worldly conditions, had set before him a goal of power and prestige to be attained without the medium of arts, graces, tact, wealth—by sheer weight of merit alone. . . . The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds. The Professor’s indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. . . . [T]he framework of an established social order cannot be effectually shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence. . . . [T]he most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace [such as] the peace of soothed vanity . . . or perhaps of appeased conscience.39

The Professor is an overly ambitious man who disdains worldliness, faint-heartedness and the cowardice of hiding behind such artificial values as wealth, civility and diplomacy. The irony, for Conrad, lies in the fact that his own “values”—leading inevitably to the necessary shattering of social order by “collective or individual violence”—function as a pretext for satisfying his self-centeredness and quasi-pathological (but not entirely pathological) urge for destruction. Ideally, such an urge could be a covert attempt to find peace of mind by appeasing what Conrad perceives to be the terrorist’s extreme vanity and narcissism. Towards the end of the book,
however, the Professor seems to be dangerously consolidating his natural hatred for
common people’s weakness and cowardice into what today would appear to be a
blatantly fascist tactic of indiscriminate extermination: “Exterminate, exterminate!
That is the only way of progress. . . . First the great multitude of the weak must go,
then the only relatively strong. You see? First the blind, then the deaf and the dumb . . .
and so on. . . . Haven’t I suffered enough from this oppression of the weak?” “And yet I am
the force. . . .”40 Conrad strips away “the fetishes of terrorism” and presents
humanity “in its starkest, most troubling form.”41 The Professor as a pure kind of
“force” constitutes the true face of destruction and terrorism given that he does not
need a cause or motive for perpetrating his deeds: “He is a necessary efflorescence of
the inhumanity of the city, a figuration constructed from alienation. . . .”42 As an
alienated persona with explosives strapped onto his body, he encapsulates the dark
and unintelligible realm of death. Nothing but “death is written on [his] body and
death is not interpretable, it is the liminal case which simultaneously forbids all
thought of the threshold.”43 Neither the image of the Professor nor his yearning for
mass destruction was new in Edwardian fiction. Jack London’s short story “The
Enemy of All the World,” published in the same year as The Secret Agent,” features a
University student who invents a deadly weapon of mass destruction and uses it to kill
thousands of people in America and Europe.44

In 1911, Conrad published Under Western Eyes which, far from promoting the
image of the terrorist as an eccentric as well as demoralized character, attempts to
trace the reasons behind certain youths’ decision to abandon their comfortable lives or
their professional careers and reorient themselves towards terrorism. The “western
eyes” of the novel are those of an English-language instructor who becomes friends
with a bunch of Russian conspirators or would-be revolutionaries located in
Switzerland. Drawing inspiration from Czar Alexander’s assassination by People’s
Will in 1881, Conrad grapples with the death of de Plehve, the cruel Minister of the
Interior who was assassinated in 1904 by an individual named Haldin. The
protagonist of the story, Razumov, is a generally apolitical figure—his very name
meaning “son of reason”—who gets a surprise visit from Haldin and learns of the
latter’s murderous act. In the second part of the novel, the reader is transferred to
Geneva where Razumov infiltrates a circle of terrorists—exiles from the East—and
ends up becoming a government spy. Conrad is highly critical of terrorist violence but
simultaneously suspicious of Western democracies’ role in the dissemination of the
phenomenon. Thus, the device of “Western eyes” enables him to comment on both Western injustice as well as Eastern terrorism. In fact, the novel perfectly resonates with twenty-first-century readers in its attempt to elucidate the affinity between illegal immigration and terrorism or extremism on the European continent as well as its preoccupation with the psychological state of the suicide bomber. The complicity of the West and the East (as envisioned by Conrad) in the spawning of terrorism brings to mind the interdependence (or rather codependency) of state terror and anti-state violence, the one frequently being a mirror image of the other.45

As has been made clear in previous chapters, terrorism was originally conceptualized as state terror or state-sponsored terrorism before it went on to assume the form of anti-state violence and revolutionary action against governmental structures and institutions. George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, published back in 1949, presents the murkiest imaginable allegory about the future state of humanity, a direct comment on Stalinist and Fascist totalitarianism, and a prophetic glimpse into late twentieth-century visualizations of state power, bureaucracy and individual unfreedom. The society that Orwell creates is dominated by the Party to which every citizen succumbs and whose sole intention is the destruction of individual will, desire and spontaneity and the establishment of an emotionless as well as asexual world that lacks judgment and critical instinct. As the high-ranking Party bureaucrat O’ Brien insists:

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power. . . . One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. . . . The object of power is power. . . . Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. . . . All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always . . . there will be the intoxication of power. . . . Always, at every moment, there will be . . . the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever.46
Orwell is here providing a grotesque image of revolutionary groups of the past—such as the French Revolution Jacobins or the October Revolution Bolsheviks—which, in Orwell’s mind, ended up establishing dictatorships in order to “safeguard” their revolution. In 1984 Orwellian society, however, one does not need the excuse of self-legitimation precisely because one starts a revolution in order to safeguard the dictatorship. In this light, persecution and torture are sought out as ends in themselves, not as vehicles through which people can be governed properly. The dictatorial regime openly admits its ever-growing addiction to power as well as its insatiable desire to mortify its citizens. The Party needs to constantly terrorize and inflict pain upon the population even if the latter is already subdued (in fact, particularly when it already has succumbed to the will of the Party) apparently because without pain and terror it cannot be known whether the population is actually obeying the State’s orders or its own will.

Hannah Arendt comments insightfully upon the totalitarian state’s sneaky practices. As she says, terror “is no longer used as a means to exterminate and frighten opponents, but as an instrument to rule masses of people who are perfectly obedient.” Paradoxically, “total terror is launched only after [absolute domination upon the subjects has been established] and the regime no longer has anything to fear from the opposition.”

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the one-party state along with its bureaucratic apparatus controls every area of human life while bureaucracy emerges as the ultimate weapon for repressing individuality and human personality:

A Party member is required to have not only the right opinions, but the right instincts. Many of the beliefs and attitudes demanded of him are never plainly stated, and could not be stated without laying bare the contradictions inherent [in the Party’s ideology]. . . . [H]e will in all circumstances know, without taking thought, what is the true belief or the desirable emotion. . . . A Party member is expected to have no private emotions. . . . He is supposed to live in a continuous frenzy of hatred of foreign enemies and internal traitors, triumph over victories, and self-abasement before the power and wisdom of the Party.

“A Party member is expected to have no private emotions,” still, she has to know what “the desirable emotion” at any given time is supposed to be. The Party’s ideology calls for a suspension of the citizens’ critical judgment and their ability to discern the ideology’s inherent contradictoriness. On the other hand, rather
paradoxically, the citizen is called upon to have a sharp awareness of and instinct for the appropriateness of her emotions in each respective situation. In other words, the subject is asked to have the critical instinct to trace the right moment at which she will . . . repress that instinct. In essence, at stake is the imposition of a perverted kind of free will (a *pseudo*-free will) as the volition to freely (as opposed to forcibly) endorse the doctrines and dogmas of the State—the Will of the Party. The ultimate kind of terrorism, that is, is the one that the subject is compelled to impose upon its own self—an invincible, because intangible, form of terrorism. State Terror was, for Orwell, the Order of the day and the future predicament of technology-driven human civilization.50

Twentieth-century literature has also explored the role of ethics and morality in the formation of terrorist subjectivity. Doris Lessing, in her humorous novel *The Good Terrorist* (1985), delves into the question of how it is possible for a “good” and “moral” person to entangle herself in an act of terrorism.51 The setting is London where a bunch of young revolutionaries born of bourgeois families come together in their common loathing of modern capitalism and British imperialism.52 The problem is that carrying out a successful terrorist attack proves to be something that is beyond their competence. Only Alice Mellings with her practical mind and determination seems to be capable of organizing a decent “hit.” The irony is that she is subject to exploitation by the rest of the radicals—she even cooks and cleans for them, that is, she performs all those bourgeois roles and functions that the revolutionaries theoretically shrink away from in horror.

Lessing paints a psychological and personal rather than political portrait of the terrorist by demonstrating how an innocent individual is gradually sliding into lawlessness and utter immorality: “We all know the criminal, the terrible condition of Britain. We all know the fascist imperialistic government must be forcibly overthrown!” Alice listened “to every word, with a sweet, trustful, even beautiful smile; this was the Jasper she loved best. . . .” Here was “the leader. The real thing.”53 Alice’s fascination with “the real thing” bespeaks terrorists’ passion for making what they think of as a real difference in the world, and reveals their Utopian desire to lead society away from its consumerist or apolitical concerns by forcing it to espouse a more responsible, active, and politically sensitive stance of life. Moreover, the preoccupation with the real amounts to a concern over the possibility of breaking down the barrier between word and deed, or theory and action. Finally, Alice and her
comrades’ naïve fantasies about the radical transformation of the world through violence introduce them, indeed, to the dark side of reality—participation in a real IRA terrorist act ending up in destruction and total chaos. Thus, even if they haven’t managed to transform the world, at least they have succeeded in transforming their own selves. Lessing’s novel is an ironic remark on the illusions of terrorism and the narcissistic propensities of the upper-middle-class theoretical idealist who tries unsuccessfully to infiltrate the real world of cruelty and full-blown revolutionary violence.

As already demonstrated, terrorism is not just a specific event of terror: it is also the narrative and the language encompassing it. One always has to keep in mind that terrorism is constituted by symbolic acts of extreme violence intended to drastically affect the political arena. To grasp the symbolism of an act of terrorism, one has to understand its language. Given, therefore, that terrorist violence relies upon symbolism and language to put across its (political) message to a particular audience, and that interpretative skills are required to assess an event’s meaning, one may conclude that there is a certain amount of “literariness,” even an artistic or novelistic quality underlying the phenomenon of terrorism. Furthermore, both art/literature and terrorism need to appeal to a certain audience’s fears, prejudices, judgments, but also to their sense of taste, their instincts and aesthetic sensibilities.

Even prior to the game-changing event in terrorist history, September 11, 2001, literature and the novel had begun to grasp the underlying competitiveness between terrorists and artists/novelists. The transformative power of original fiction was strikingly similar to the dramatic impact of terrorist attacks upon human consciousness and imagination. Don de Lillo, with his 1991 novel *Mao II*, had already picked upon the uncanny relationship between terrorist violence and the original artist’s attempt at radically reconfiguring the way people think, feel, and behave. De Lillo’s protagonist, Bill Gray, is a recluse writer who is desperately trying to cordon himself off from the world of the media, politics, information, and the everyday in order to protect the aesthetic autonomy of his literary writing. Eventually, however, he yields to the immediacy of everyday tragedy and the overload of information on terrorist activity and extreme violence. Although Gray highlights the importance of the novelist’s mission to shape or reshape human consciousness through literature and narrative, deep down he feels envious of terrorists because, whereas literary authors can allegedly make absolutely no real difference in the world, especially after they
become commercial products themselves, terrorists are capable of attacking human sensibility and consciousness, thereby reconstructing the world of imagination by inventing always new ways of speaking to the hearts and minds of people—who, let us not forget, constitute terrorists’ “audience.” For Bill Gray, in the past the novelist had the almost exclusive capacity to alter cultural life, but now it is bomb-makers, hijackers and air-pirates that have taken over from artists and novelists who have nothing left to say, no important message to convey. In essence, de Lillo criticizes the conventionality and predictability of novelists and their disappointing tendency to be engrossed by the dominant ideologies and cultures that surround them. Simultaneously, de Lillo seems enticed by terrorists’ ability to create their own original spaces or recesses within those dominant structures and cultures.

A hostage situation in Beirut calls his attention away from his writing as well as his own aesthetic independence, and thus, driven by a desire to appropriate some of the “magic” and mystery stemming from an actual intervention in international politics, he decides to go to Beirut and meet Abu Rashid, the leader of the terrorist group responsible for the crisis. The upshot of his story is anything but heroic since he is involved in a traffic accident and dies a meaningless death. On the one hand, the protagonist is frustrated at literature’s inability to make a tangible and substantial contribution to the real world (which is what prevents him from continuing to write novels in the first place), but on the other, taking a plunge into real politics and world terror affairs does not render him any more capable of altering consciousness (either others’ or his own) or offering a more cogent narrative that can bridge the gap between literary words and political as well as terrorist deeds. De Lillo is giving the reader the story of an author who fails both in creating original fiction and making an original (that is, meaningful and consciousness-raising) contribution at the level of politics and real life.

However pessimistic about literature’s (non)originality, Mao II is actually very original in that it foreshadows the turning point in world affairs—9/11—in its preoccupation with the aesthetics and political dimension of the World Trade Center (and the so-called Twin Towers) as well as its focus on terrorists as agents of an endless restructuring of the world. Moreover, de Lillo’s novel anticipates the advent of so-called “9/11 novel” or “post-9/11 fiction” which is accompanied by an increased interest in the role of religion and fundamentalism in the September 11 attacks and other terrorist strikes as well as a refocusing on the importance, or not, of polarizing
ideological discourses based on geopolitical and quasi-metaphysical differences and conceptions such as the “East” and the “West.”

Don de Lillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) typifies the “9/11 novel” category in its portrayal of a (Western) world lost in uncertainty and doubt.⁵⁵ Keith is a lawyer who has just escaped from the WTC disaster and who goes back to the flat where he used to live with his former wife and his son. Albeit traumatized by images they cannot possibly process, and in a state of shock, Keith and his family attempt to retrieve a sense of normalcy in their lives. De Lillo sketches out a sharp contrast between the ineradicable doubt and ambivalence a terror-stricken Western middle-class family has fallen into and the absolute certainties and unshaken beliefs of (the apparently non-Western) terrorists that attacked the WTC using planes as bombs. In the novel, we see Hammad following the instructions of Amir who is someone “with a mind in the upper skies, making sense of things, drawing things together.”⁵⁶ For Hammad life is predestined. “We are carried towards the day the minute we are born . . . finding the way already chosen for us.”⁵⁷ Hammad’s sense of the sanctity of the afterlife is, at this point, shown to be diametrically opposed to Western citizens’ sacrilegious “attachment to life” of which, in Hammad’s opinion, they ought to be ashamed.⁵⁸ On the one hand, we are presented with an almost paralyzing existential uncertainty about life and its values, and on the other with an almost unswerving trust in the Koran’s injunctions.

Arguably, the world constructed by de Lillo in the *Falling Man* is one of absolute dichotomies and polarized notions: “religion” versus “secularism,” “East” versus “West,” “good” versus “evil,” “certainty” versus maddening “doubt,” “victim” versus “victimizer.” The figure of the jihadist who rages against the unholy anomie of Western complacency is depicted in more or less stereotypical terms, thus reinforcing the dogma of the clash of civilizations, manners or even religions. The unforgettable image of the falling man is that towering image that cannot be processed mentally, psychologically or intellectually, and for that reason it may serve the author’s need to reflect upon the concept of unimaginable and inconceivable terror and its imponderable implications for (Western) humanity.

John Updike’s version of the jihadist in *Terrorist* (2006) seems to be a little more complicated than de Lillo’s own take on the Islamist fighter, yet Updike too is caught up in stereotypes regarding the image and the character of the Muslim or the Islamist.⁵⁹ Updike gives us the story of Ahmad, a young American Muslim living in
New Jersey, in post-9/11 America. By definition, therefore, the jihadist is not depicted here as the typical alien, an *other* emerging from a fundamentalist Middle East to punish the immorality of the West. Ahmad is the son of a Catholic mother and an Egyptian father. Raised by his mother only and lacking a father figure in his life, he is vulnerable to the fiery words of Shaikh Rashid, an American imam preaching at a mosque nearby. Ahmad is a confused adolescent, torn between his natural (biological) needs and his yearning for a spirituality that cannot be found in the modern West. Thus he finds himself simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the beauty of the females surrounding him. A fellow student of his, Joryleen, brings out the “devil” in him:

He pictures her smooth body, darker than caramel but paler than chocolate, roasting in that vault of flames and being scorched into blisters; he experiences a shiver of pity. . . . Her perfume cloys in his nostrils; the crease between her breasts bothers him. . . . Her lips . . . startle him by faltering in embarrassment. . . . He slams his locker shut with an anger mostly at himself, for having scolded and rejected her. . . . His face hot with confusion.  

Updike may be providing an image of a sexually repressed young man but, at the same time, he paints the picture of a man who is gradually radicalizing himself by choosing the path of militant Islamism; a man threading his way towards fundamentalism and jihad. Updike invites us to explore the moral and spiritual challenges of jihadism by calling attention to the need of a deeper understanding of Islamic struggle. While reading the book we become more and more familiar with the injunctions of the Koran, however, we are given very little insight into the reason(s) why Ahmad gets to choose the road of radicalization and Islamism. Perhaps, coming up with the real causes of religious terrorism was not the author’s real intention. Besides, Updike, just like de Lillo, seems to “consider Islamist terror an existential threat to the political order of the city rather than a ‘symbolic’ response to American hubris and its single-minded pursuit of global financial and political power.”  

True, Updike is a lover of small, seemingly insignificant things: for instance, going for a walk or tuning in to one’s favorite radio station. Such are the things, though, which not only constitute the “political order of the city” but also reaffirm the will of the city to hold out against irrational fury and religious passion that pose a major threat to the very foundations of the globalized world. On his way to making terrorist history by
detonating a bomb that he has hidden inside a truck, Ahmad, in an almost stunning twist of plot, changes his mind and decides that his God has not bestowed upon him the responsibility of taking the life of His enemies.

Even though the novelists discussed above do evoke some type of empathy with the Islamic terrorist, none of them expands upon the figure of the non-Westerner to include ordinary Muslims as well as characters of various religious or political backgrounds. In essence, the question to be asked is whether novelists can afford to construct fictional characters that deconstruct the binaries of terrorist discourse, for instance, the opposition between the native and the alien or between religious Islam and secular West; or characters that do not fit easily discernible political categories: in short, personalities that challenge our common assumptions concerning religion, politics and societal affiliation. It is in postcolonial fiction that one finds the opportunity to reflect upon alternative (that is, neither Western nor non-Western) conceptions of terror and the terrorist. Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), to bring up one prominent example, goes beyond a mere deconstruction of oppositional notions. Hamid employs a certain type of dramatic monologue for his basic character Changez, a Pakistani graduate of Princeton University. Changez supposedly narrates his story to an American man (probably a CIA agent) who, however, stays silent throughout the book in an interesting reversal of the rule that demands the silencing of the non-American in the post-9/11 world. The reader can never be sure what exactly happens in the story, whether Changez can be trusted and relied upon for what he claims, or even of the story’s finale. As the novel draws to its close, threatening clouds of ambivalence hover over the two men, thus obfuscating their real intentions and casting a long shadow over the conclusion of the story. What one suspects is that a sneak attack is about to take place but one has no clue as to who will launch it. What we do know about the protagonist is that in the beginning he seems quite comfortable in America, having adjusted completely to the multicultural environment and feeling free to pursue the American dream involving the achievement of secular goals such as money, recognition and power. He has a problematic relationship with Erica, an American girl who seems unable to get over the death of her ex-boyfriend Chris. Moreover, immediately after his graduation he gets a job at Underwood Samson, a first-rate New York evaluation firm.

Changez does not refer to himself as a Pakistani or an American, but he “succumbs to a post-political discourse in thinking of himself . . . as first and foremost
an Underwood Sampson employee. . . . [T]he story comes to be about the impossibility of maintaining this globalized, post-political identity position as the forces of resurgent nationalism develop.63 On the other hand, the very title of the book—reluctant fundamentalist—betrays the dilemma of the narrator who considers two different options: to espouse fundamentalism and to renounce it by keeping up with his cosmopolitan lifestyle. The dilemma, however, remains unresolved in the sense that we are never positive about whether he chooses the former, the latter, or a third option. Technically speaking, a fundamentalist who is reluctant is hardly a fundamentalist, at least a typical one. Still, to realize this does not automatically mean that fundamentalism is off the table; on the contrary, it constitutes a serious option for the narrator.

In the novel, the issue of fundamentalism is a vexed one. Hamid takes fundamentalism out of its “normal”—religious—context and redefines it in more secular terms, as a “quality” which is already integral to the structures of modernity and global capitalism. To put it simply, certain fundamentalist ideas are already built into Western thought and practice:

[T]he use of “fundamentalism” in Hamid’s text points out that an obsessive addiction to non-negotiable (fundamental) principles also animates the forces of global capitalism. Underwood Samson’s guiding instructions to the cream of its crop is to “focus on the fundamentals” in their role of assessing the likely value of businesses which may attract the attentions of rapacious larger companies. These reflect the creed of “maximum productivity” by which all instinctual and non-productive activity can be disregarded. . . . Eventually, Changez turns away from the micro-universe of his work, refusing to focus on the financial fundamentals at the expense of the broader political picture.64

From a certain point on, Changez refuses to adopt America’s secular fundamentalism which he somehow associates with the superpower’s neo-colonialist tactics in the Middle East after the declaration of the War on Terror by President Bush in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Changez ends up feeling betrayed both by Erica and America—obviously, Erica stands for Am-Erica—the former not being able to respond to his love, while the latter failing to protect his country, Pakistan—an American ally.65 Hamid’s innovation here is that we cannot be certain that Changez resorts to terrorism and religious, anti-American fundamentalism
as a result: in short, there is no definitive answer as to what has truly happened to the “hero.” It could be said that Hamid’s protagonist is a postcolonial subject narrating his story from a deterritorialized standpoint, one which is equally informed, but not determined, by colonialism, neo-colonialism, nationalism and the discourses of globalization. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* privileges no specific subject position but rather challenges widely-held assumptions as to the viability of any single solution to the problem of terrorism, fundamentalism and radicalization. Furthermore, it challenges the legitimacy of the globalized world as well as the legitimacy of that world’s preeminent “resident,” the *cosmopolitan* citizen, who proves to be a rather elusive, misguiding and, in the final analysis, mistaken concept that points to a transcendental, apolitical, hence non-existent subject.
Notes

5. Zizek, p. 69.
6. De Certeau, p.91.
20. Ibid., p. 95.
21. Ibid., p. 95.
22. Ibid., p. 96.
23. Ibid., p. 105.
24. The recent “Occupy Wall Street” movement does constitute such a “poetic geography” or microbe that occupies liberated space. That movement calls attention to the fact that beneath the generally acceptable capitalistic order hide centers of radical micro-powers ready to thwart the entire edifice of capitalism from the inside. Such “terrorist” centers do not take up space of their own but rather appropriate the enemy’s territory.
28. An early and lengthier version of this subchapter (5.1) was published in the *International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review*, vol. 12 (2015). I am grateful to the editors for allowing me to use it in this book.
29. Richard Rorty argues that it is the novel, rather than any other genre or type of writing, which can trace the roots of modern violence (and, potentially, terrorism). The novel constitutes one of the “principle vehicles of moral change and progress.” See Richard Rorty, introduction to *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xvii.
33. The period of the 1860s in Russia was very similar to the 1960s in America. Students adopting an alternative aesthetic by growing long hair and going underground established groups that opposed the czarist rule and celebrated the rise of a new kind of liberated humanity. The Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will) stood out as such a group whose mission was to ignite a revolution. See

34. Robert J. C. Young, “Terror Effects,” in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, ed. Elleke Boehmer et al. (UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 322-3. The fear of the immigrant, a sentiment which frequently goes unacknowledged, escalated in 2015 (the year of writing this book) when no fewer than a million immigrants crossed the European border, making their way towards the more developed countries of the European Union. Which of those could actually be terrorists?


38. Lyotard’s *unpresentable* as a sublime quality that eludes interpretation or representation is admittedly informed by Edmund Burke’s conception of sublimity and Kant’s theorization of it as eventually contained by the intellect and reason. Nevertheless, Lyotard feels more comfortable with Burke’s own take on the sublime because the latter involves an insurmountable kind of terror, one which cannot be appeased through the operation of logic and reason. Still, Lyotard appears to be even more radical than Burke insofar as he treats the terror at stake as some kind of *presence* rather than *representation*, in other words, as already implicating physically and emotionally the perceiver of terror who senses the horror of the close proximity of the terrifying object—terror as presence—by contrast to Burke who keeps the object at a relative distance—terror as representation—and thus, somehow, aestheticizes it. Inspector Heat is momentarily terrified by the close proximity of a perverse kind of death—indeed, by the unpresentable itself—but the “sympathy” that he feels shows that he will manage eventually to rise above pure terror by activating his reasoning faculties.


44. Jack London, “The Enemy of All the World,” JACKLONDONS.NET

45. Literary novels have occasionally demonstrated tricky links between the state and its terrorist or anarchist opponents. In G.K Chesterton’s The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare (1908), government agents and anarchists turn out to be identical. In this work, the Central Council of Anarchists is actually made up of undercover agents trying to subvert the terrorist “cause” from within.


48. Ibid., p. 440.

49. Orwell, p. 220.

50. Another very important novel that weaves the question of free will into the problem of state terror is Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange, written in 1961 and narrating the acts of Alex and his extremely violent gang. See, Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange (London: Penguin: 2000). The book contains shocking scenes of violence and terror inflicted upon unsuspecting victims by Alex and his friends. Nonetheless, their non-rationalizable violence is only commensurate with the government’s own “rational” but just as cruel and inhumane policy: Alex is captured and put in a reformation program during which the state can study his criminal demeanor and, eventually, through brainwashing techniques it can rehabilitate him by eradicating his inexplicably violent nature or tendencies. Strictly speaking, there is no question of terrorism in the novel, at least on the part of Alex and his gang, to the extent that there seems to be no political agenda behind the horrifying violence illustrated in the book. In fact, there seems to be no reason at all (no particular “cause”) that can account for the gang’s unprecedented violence. Although they resort to acts of terror and brutality against the population, they cannot be seen as “terrorists,” nor is their brutality connected with a certain motive. The “reformation” program implemented by the government is therefore a way to contain the violence of its subjects and make sure that the “secret” behind such violence is laid bare.
Regardless of whether there is a secret motive or not, it is the State that emerges as the true terrorist insofar as it attempts to unnaturally change Alex’s nature so that it fits the pattern of the law-abiding citizen. In this framework, the governmental apparatuses in Burgess’s novel tamper with Alex’s “free will”—the primitive will to torture or kill—and force him to adjust to a much more socially acceptable behavior, one, however, which apparently could not be further away from his “real,” indomitably and authentically violent self. At issue therefore is the singularity of so-called “free will” and the danger of compromising it in the name of civility and propriety. Alex’s violence is absolutely horrifying, especially because it cannot be rationally explained, while the government attempts to somehow terrorize its citizens so that they will never exhibit a behavior that cannot possibly be accounted for. The state exerts terrorism because it fears the emergence of inexplicable violence, such as the type of violence illustrated in the novel: “What . . . gives violence its uncanny power in the novella is its explicitness, the abruptness of its outbreak and the raw realism with which it is described. . . . A violent act turns cruder when it cannot be justified. . . . Yet to provide motives means, in a way, to rationalize brutality divesting it of its shocking dimension.” Check out Emmanouil Aretoulakis, “The Impossibility of Violence in Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange,” in Portraits of the Artist in A Clockwork Orange, ed. Emmanuel Vernadakis et al. (Angers: Presses de l’ Universite d’ Angers, 2003), p. 41.

52. As already emphasized, terrorists usually belong to the middle and upper-middle classes.
53. The Good Terrorist, p. 236.
56. Ibid., p. 80.
57. Ibid., p. 170.
58. Ibid., p. 177. De Lillo put those specific words in Hammad’s mouth because he would certainly have been informed of Osama bin Laden’s claim that his fighters are superior and strong since they do not cling to life, unlike people in the West.

60. Ibid., pp. 9-11.


64. Ibid., p.143.

65. Construed allegorically, Erica’s failure to live up to Changez’s expectations might emblematize America’s overt will to integrate the Muslim other and its covert reluctance to embrace it (her/him) as equal. Erica has fully accepted Changez as her friend but she can’t accept him as her lover, at least not on a steady basis, since she is continually reliving the past with her dead lover Chris—a remnant of a now defunct Chris-tian innocence prior to the War on Terror and the Clash of Civilizations.
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CONCLUSION

This book has placed a clear emphasis on terrorism as rhetoric, language and performance. It has persistently argued, for example, that a terrorist act is constituted as such by its appeal to an audience, its sensory power as well as its communicability. In such a context, one of the basic arguments made is that terrorism is a performative language or utterance with a highly symbolic value. Moreover, to the extent that terrorists seek to “terrorize” a certain audience, they need to be convincing in their symbolism. Imagination is crucial in capturing the symbolic meaning of terrorism. The perpetrator of a terrorist act, that is, tacitly assigns her constituency the task of deciphering the real “objective” of an attack as well as imagining the suffering of those directly and physically affected during an attack. One should not forget that terrorist violence is inflicted upon a certain person or group so that some other person or group might hear the message.

A terrorist “message” is usually political or bears political attire. However, for such a (political) message to put its meaning across, it needs to be able to stimulate an audience’s imaginative or even literary sensibilities. If literature is, first and foremost, an aesthetic experience, terrorism is a “literary” endeavor insofar as it founds itself upon symbolic language that we are called upon to feel or “experience” imaginatively rather than understand cognitively. In this light, the terrorist, too, should be seen through the prism of a certain kind of literariness or artfulness, to the extent that s/he functions like an original “artist” who contemplates and subsequently effects an attack which is (almost) unprecedented, unheard-of and original with the intention of making an impression, igniting terror, and eventually subverting a society’s structures and ideologies. To the terrorist mind, the dramatic (as well as traumatic) impact of a successful act of terrorist violence appears fascinatingly similar to the impact that a great work of literature has upon people’s worldview, morals and lifestyle. Since terrorism is asymmetric by nature—it has nothing to do with a conventional war—the
terrorist “plays God” in deciding who lives and who dies, and in determining the course entire communities will take in the future. Through this lens, terrorism could be viewed as a form of political violence that paradoxically exceeds politics by entering the realm of aesthetics, fantasy, mythology or even magic. The “magical” aspect of terrorism has rarely been touched upon. It is alluded to, but not directly grappled with, by Terry Eagleton in his *Holy Terror* (2005):

> There are times when the terror which the symbolic order has safely defused, sublimating it into the majesty of law and sovereignty, comes bursting through the fault lines of that order in the shape of the ineffable Real. It is this which we know among other things as terrorism, a fury which is unleashed not least when the law has fallen into disrepute. Yet it is also a built-in possibility, a disaster waiting to happen.¹

In a way, terrorism springs forth as a by-product or side-effect of law and the sovereign state, conjured magically out of the symbolic order. The “fury” which is unexpectedly and abruptly unleashed is nothing other than the fury of the irrational element breaking into the system of law and rationality in the shape of a magical force. That force—the ineffably “Real,” according to Eagleton—refuses to yield to law, order and hegemony but thrives precisely upon those, as their “built-in possibility.”

So far, we have been tackling terrorism and terror from the standpoint of aesthetics, symbolism, rhetoric and philosophy. But terrorism is not only *language, performance or experience*. Terrorism is also unconditional death, excruciating pain, physical and psychological incapacitation. An act of terror is not just an act of political violence as we euphemistically say; a terrorist outrage causes the mutilation of bodies, the dissipation of human parts, in short, the dehumanization and demoralization of humanity. In addition, it causes the drowning of hopes and dreams in a sea of blood and the dramatic shattering of people’s individual sense of stability, security and well-being. For all those reasons, whenever the issue of terrorism turns up, it should always be discussed alongside *ethics*. To represent terrorism and do justice to all its aspects, it takes ethical as well as aesthetic appreciation. To put it in a straightforward manner: recourse to terrorism can never, should never be justified on any grounds and under any pretexts. An ethical appreciation of a terrorist incident entails also a full representation of the graphic and atrocious details emanating from
it. In order to always be reminded of terrorism’s lethality and goriness, we need to be able to bear witness to the ineffable tragedy and infinite misery of the victims so that the image of terror as something indescribably horrific and appalling is imprinted on our memory.

In his 9/11 novel *Windows on the World* (2004), French author Frederic Beigbeder provides a fascinating account of the WTC attacks given retrospectively by the victims of the disaster themselves. Beigbeder accuses Western media and public opinion of attempting to censor and repress the real violence of 9/11—the lifeless bodies, the people falling headlong to their deaths, the crushed skulls, etc.—in the name of morality and a sense of decorum. The narrator/victim therefore, is fiercely criticizing the habit of silencing the cries of animals (that were actually the cries of human beings), of hiding the scenes of the real fountains of blood and censoring the images of the scattered limbs, thus complying with a twisted sense of decency or morality, as if exposing citizens to the real thing would contaminate them or kill the humanity in them. As he emphatically says, it is not the representation of reality that is repulsive; it is, rather, reality itself that is ineffably ugly. In that sense, representing ugliness, playing it over and over in our heads, will help us not to lose contact with our sense of solidarity, philanthropy, humanity and justice.
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