CHAPTER 2

Twentieth-century Terrorism:
Politics and Aesthetic Sensibility
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 spectacrality 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.”\(^3\) 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 \textit{act}, in its
terrible immediacy, over the \textit{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 \textit{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.”\(^4\) 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.

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 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 though 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’état 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

58
the act on the enemies of the state. 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.\textsuperscript{21}

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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{22}

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. . . .”

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 Stalinalee 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.  

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.”

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.”26 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.”27 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.”28 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 aesthetic 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.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.”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.


―Une bombe. Un attentat anarchiste au restaurant Foyot.” *L’éclair*. April 6, 1894.
