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 metonymies 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 rereading 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 a 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. 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 dwarfing 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 chronotop(e) (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 chronotop(e)s 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, to help retain the complexity of the city, its unpresentability 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 literalism 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. . . .”

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.” That poetic geography constitutes “liberated space” that can actually be “occupied.”

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.

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.\textsuperscript{28}

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.\textsuperscript{29} From the late nineteenth century onwards, novelists had always been fascinated with the figure of the terrorist. In \textit{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-existential 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 hit, 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. . . .” Conrad strips away “the fetishes of terrorism” and presents humanity “in its starkest, most troubling form.” 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. . . .” 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.” 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.

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.\textsuperscript{45}

As has been made clear in previous chapters, terrorism was originally conceptualized as \textit{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 \textit{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:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}
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.”47 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.”48 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.49

“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.  

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. 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. 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.” 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. 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.” For Hammad life is predestined. “We are carried towards the day the minute we are born . . . finding the way already chosen for us.” 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. 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. 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.60

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.”61 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.  

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.

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. 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.
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.
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.


http://www.sharonpaz.com/falling_03.html.


