Terrorist or Victim? Comparative Analysis of the Characters in *The Zero* by Jess Walter (U.S.A.) and *In Praise of Hatred* by Khaled Khalifa (Syria)

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Synopsis

The characters of Jess Walter's novel and Khaled Khalifa's are built as figures of terrorist or victim. According to Bertrand Gervais' theory, a figure is first of all an object of obsession. The characters of these novels obsess us, questioning our cultural references which permit us to define who represents the terrorist and who represents the victim.

Both novels play with these categories, underlining the manipulations of the images through various discourses. This questioning of usual conceptions is built through the use of lost characters, unable to communicate or simply live. These characters illustrate a crisis of the contemporary imaginary and subject.

Biography

Chloé Tazartez is a PhD student in comparative literature at the Université Rennes 2 under the supervision of Professor Emmanuel Bouju, working on terrorism in American and Arabic literature written after September 11. Her previous publications include a paper on Jess Walter's novel in the online revue *Interférences Littéraires* (n°5 Le sujet apocalyptique).

Essay

Some people say that we entered the 21st century on September Eleven 2001, making this event a turning point in history. While we might contest this date, there seems to be consensus concerning the importance of terrorism in contemporary society.

Even if terrorist activism exists for a long time (Samson is one of the older examples), the noun "terrorism" emerged during the 19th century, after the French Revolution and the period called "la Terreur". The Russian nihilist activism marked the 19th century and conferred a strong political dimension to the term. The notion became more complex in the course of the 20th century, while it is increasingly used by the media and the government, culminating now in the expression "the war on Terror", which concerns a very large field of actions. Nowadays, the term's application is widely contested and several calls for international consensus on a legal definition of the notion rise through the world.

According to Chambers' Dictionary:

Terrorism *noun* the systematic use of violence and intimidation to force a government or community, etc to act in a certain way or accept certain demands. Terrorist noun, adj. [18c]

Terrorize or –ise verb 1 to frighten greatly. 2 to use terrorism against. [19c]

(Chambers, 2005)

The Arabic term comes from the root "rahaba" which serves to create the whole lexical field of terror. The dictionaries of classical Arabic Lisân al-'arab (13th) and al-Qâmûs al-muhît (14th), do not contain the term "irhâb" corresponding to "terrorism". It contains only terms like "rahba" which refers to the emotion of terror. In the Arabic-French dictionary Kazimirski (19th), there is no mention of the term "irhâb". I have not yet succeed in determining exactly when the Arabic term emerged, but it is surely during the 20th.

What can we put under "the systematic use of violence and intimidation to force a government or community, etc to act in a certain way or accept certain demands"? It is a broad definition using words as "violence" and "intimidation" whose acceptations are very subjective. The treatment of the events in the Arab world since the beginning of 2011 in the media reflects these ambiguities: are the protagonists demonstrators, rioters, terrorists? Are the events revolutions, riots, civil wars, repression of demonstrations or repressions of rebels?

What emerges from the reading of Jess Walter's novel and Khaled Khalifa's is the idea that maybe what we identify at first glance, as the terrorist and the victim (the bad guy and the good guy), could become something else: the terrorist could be a good citizen manipulated to appear as a terrorist, the victim could justify terrorist acts because of its previous status of victim. According to the Chambers' dictionary's definition, somebody can be considered as a victim if he or she is "subjected to death, suffering, ill-treatment or trickery" or "killed in sacrifice or ritual." (Chambers, 894)

The Zero, written by the American author Jess Walter in 2006, relates the story of a policeman, Brian Remy, victim of knowledge-gaps since 9/11 (at a moment he is in his apartment, and then, in a second, he finds himself in the street, unable to tell how nor when he left his place). He thinks he is looking for March Selios, an employee in the WTC seen going out of her office a few minutes before the first plane hit the tower. He has to discover if she died in the attacks, or if she is still alive. But this is only a cover: unbeknownst to him, his real mission consists in founding a fictive terrorist cell in order to allow the CIA and the FBI to arrest it just before a fake terrorist attack. This successful arrest should permit to the CIA and the FBI to conquest again the confidence of the American population. When Brian Remy realizes the real aim of his mission, he is horrified and tries to stop it, but it is too late: Jaguar, an Arab American who thought he was working for the American government on an infiltration mission as the leader of the fictive terrorist cell, transforms himself in a suicide bomber when he discovers that he has been manipulated by Remy.

In Praise of Hatred, third novel of the Syrian author Khaled Khalifa, was written in 2008. It has just been translated into French, Italian and Dutch and the English version should be available in 2012. The narrator of this novel is a young woman who lives with her aunts in her grand-father's house in Syria. She was raised in praise of hatred: she has two uncles who are activists in a religious fundamentalist organization that perpetrates terrorist attacks against members of the police. One of them, Bakr is finally forced into exile while Abdallah takes part in the fight in Afghanistan, helped by an American contact from the CIA. The narrator is also part of a fundamentalist female organization: she prays a lot, she wears only black loose clothes and she wants to mutilate the girls at school who talk about sex and wear thin

jeans and blouses. But after several years in prison, her hatred disappears: she becomes a doctor and finally leaves Syria for London, where her uncle Bakr has been in exile. She is haunted by her mother's and brother's faces, her brother killed in jail, her mother killed by her son's death. She longs for her grand-father's house but cannot go back home. She can find no escape from her despair when, at the end of the novel, she is called for an emergency: her uncle Abdallah and a friend of him are in a hospital in London in a critical situation. As a doctor, she is informed of their situations and understands that if her uncle will be saved, his friend will die. She falls in love with this unconscious man and declares herself a widow, mourning her life with her symbolic husband, becoming a living ghost condemned to exile.

The characters in these two novels are trapped in terrorist violence practiced by the government and by fundamentalist groups. How are they represented? Are we faced with black and white situations? Which characteristics are used to designate terrorists and victims? Through a study of the characters in these novels, I will explore the way that terrorists and victims are represented, and question the vision of the human subject that this representation implies. Eventually, I will question the use of terrorism in works of fiction, suggesting that this is an attempt to represent what resists representation which can be considered as a way to represent a crisis of the imaginary.

The subject of Bertand Gervais' essay *Figures, Lectures*, first tome of Les *Logiques de l'imaginaire*, is the condition of apparition of a figure. The figure, for Bertrand Gervais, is a form that we have to manipulate, to build from an object of the world which obsesses us. It is one of the manifestations of the activity which takes place on the platform between the individual and the world, that Bertrand Gervais calls the imaginary (Gervais, "L'écume du contemporain"). The figure is a kind of representation that enables the individual to interact with the world, to catch the world. Thus, the figure is a protean form that an individual can change according to the important he gives to the object of the figure.

Every object of the world can become a figure when somebody transforms it in an obsession. Perception is the first step toward the construction of a figure. You have to perceive the object before being fascinated by it. The second step is imagination, you invest the object with a story, an emotion or an affect in order to be able to manipulate it (the third step), to shape it into a meaningful figure (Gervais, *Figures,Lectures* 31).

The primacy of perception in the construction of the figure is what differs in Gervais' theory from Lyotard's. In fact, the origin of the figure, according to Lyotard, is not perception, but conceptualization; the visible is the end of the process which begins in the mind. As Bertrand Gervais states in his essay, his theory is about a process of "appropriation" while Lyotard's theory is about a process of "rationalization" (Gervais, *Figures, Lectures* 67).

In the development of his thought, Bertrand Gervais calls upon a triad of Deuleuzian "conceptual characters": the museur, the scribe and the interpreter. The museur intervenes in the first phase of the construction of the figure. He perceives an object in the world and becomes obsessed by it. Then, he imagines different things which will become the various facets of the figure. Then the scribe arrives and

shapes the figure with the production of the museur. But at this stage, the figure is just an empty form; it is the interpreter who will give it a meaning.

Characters of novels can become figures if they are transformed in an obsession by the writer or the reader. According to narratological descriptions of the "character" in fiction, the character possesses three dimensions: mimetic, thematic and synthetic. The triad of conceptual characters transforms a character in an obsession, giving to it a dimension more which is the symbolic one. (Gervais, *Figures, Lectures* 164-165). The character is no more just a character; it is also a symbol for the writer and / or the reader. It can also be presented by the writer as an obsession of another character.

A figure is the result of a process of appropriation of an object which has become an obsession and which has been invested by a symbolic value. In this way, I will show how the characters of Jess Walter's *The Zero* and Khaled Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* enable the reader to form figures of terrorist and of victim.

In his essay entitled *9/11 Culture*, Jeffrey Melnick dedicates a chapter in the conception of "us" and "them" in the American culture after 9/11. About the stigmatization of the Arab American population after the attacks, he shows that the fleeting term "look Middle Eastern" covers a broad field:

This category [looks Middle Eastern] is slippery and flexible and has come to describe numerous South Asians (especially Pakistani and Sikh Americans in the United States) and variety of Muslim and non-Muslim Arab Americans. (Melnick, 108)

He also underlines that African American voices rose to contest the association of "keywords" in the government discourse as "terrorism" with "Muslims" and "Bin Laden", giving the example of Vernon Jordan's speech reminding that other terms can be associated with terrorism:

A powerful rhetorical move for African Americans was to challenge the common-sense understanding of keywords like "terrorism" and "bin Laden". (...) Longtime Washington insider Vernon Jordan employed this "keyword" strategy too, in a speech he gave in 2002 in which he reminded his audience that "Slavery was terrorism, segregation was terrorism, the bombing of four little girls in Sunday school in Birmingham was terrorism" (Melnick, 106)

It is also this kind of images that *The Zero* tries to discredit presenting a plot corresponding to the official opinion which is actually reversed in the course of the novel. The first narrative level presents a heroic American policeman (Remy), who entered a tower just before its fall, working to arrest a terrorist cell composed by ungrateful Muslim fundamentalist Arab Americans who are in the verge to perpetrate a terrorist attack. The mysterious leader of this cell is called by the CIA and the FBI "Jaguar".

The figure of terrorist appears mainly through him. First, he is presented as an obsession for Remy and his employers. Dave, Remy's boss, describes him thus:

Subject Number Six, Dave said, the cell's most mysterious member. Even Bishir isn't sure of his real name. The others call him *Ibn 'Arabi,* which appears

to be a reference to a pacifist Sufi teacher. We've given him the code name Jaguar. [...] We **think he may have become** [my emphasis] radicalized when he lost a family member, perhaps a son, during the first Gulf War, although we don't know how, or to which side. We also **believe** [my emphasis] he is Americanized, highly educated, with knowledge of explosives. (Walter, 273)

Dave has no serious information about Jaguar, only hypotheses. He never mentions his sources or official documents which potentially could contain this information. He builds an image of Jaguar to his staff which seems mainly based on rumors; Jaguar becomes a kind of urban legend. In addition, Dave engages a process of appropriation (which defines the construction of a figure according to Bertrand Gervais) by giving a code name to Jaguar (ignoring his real one) and shaping his portrait through his discourse about him. Furthermore, Jaguar is never presented in his ordinary life: he does not eat, work or sleep. He appears only in scenes where he is alone with Remy and is talking to him about broad matters as American society, trauma or violence. He is mainly built by the discourse of other characters (especially Remy's) which present him as the official creator of the terrorist cell. At first glance, he is a terrorist, while Remy is presented as a victim.

Remy suffers from his gaps and from his back. He also has problems with his view, always seeing fleeting strings. Then, he is victim of a trauma caused by the 9/11 attacks in which he lost colleagues and friends. He suffered from the attitude of his son, who repeats to everybody that his father died in the 9/11 attacks. Remy embodies the suffering American population. But the figure of the victim emerges especially from the character of March Selios. She was a consultant for oil companies. Her office was in the World Trade Center. She had been seen going out of her office a few minutes before the first plane hit the tower, and the government has suspicions on her implication in the attacks. But actually, we learn that she died in the attacks and had nothing to do with its organization. The novel begins after the attacks, so March Selios is dead since the beginning, she represents the absent. She is a figure because she is firstly presented as an obsession for the American government, then for Remy. Her image is built only through the discourse of other characters those Remy interviews. Finally, when Remy is sure of her death, she becomes the symbol of all the unknown victims of the 9/11 attacks. Even if she is only a cover for Remy's real mission, she is a ghost during the whole narrative, more or less in the background.

The example of March's character illustrates the possible reversal of status during the narration: at the beginning of the novel, she is presented as a terrorist linked to the 9/11 commando, but at the end, she is a poor victim of these attacks. It depends on the narration about her constructed by other characters. But Remy's and Jaguar's cases illustrate another process; the possibility to be a victim and a terrorist at the same time, depending on who talks about them.

Remy effectively suffers from his gaps, his back and his son's disdain. He has lost himself in the attacks; not knowing anymore what principles define him, if he is a good person or a bad one, what is a good action or a bad one or what he wants to be. We read expressions of his doubts in a stream of consciousness narration each time he tries to remember where he is, with whom and for how long he has been here. But what we know of his actions is completely different: he injured a man seriously, he killed another, he manipulated Arab Americans, frightening them in order to force them to be part of his fictious terrorist cell. He "used violence and intimidation to force people to act in a certain way or accept certain demands". Even if his actions

are part of an official program of protection, Remy is a terrorist by definition.

At the opposite, Jaguar is firstly a terrorist, presented as well by the American government and responding positively to this image by becoming a suicide bomber. But we learn that he has been manipulated by Remy, who is the real creator of the fictious terrorist cell, he is a victim of a trick and of a simplistic image of the terrorist conveyed by official discourses.

Figures of terrorist and victim tend to melt into an image of the human in crisis; Jaguar and Remy could be considered as a couple of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hide, both are one side of a coin. This is suggested by the narration, especially when Remy's psychiatrist told him that Jaguar is a hallucination. Nobody despite Remy has seen him. At various moment, the reader could in fact consider Jaguar as Remy's double, the hidden part of Remy. If we look closely to the various aspects of these two characters, we find important similarities: they are alone, they act against their convictions, they do not exist for most people and they do not succeed in expressing what they want to communicate. They doubt a lot about what is their part in society and seem often desperate. They are potential humans in the sense that they act, speak and live but without investing ethically these characteristics of humanity (cf. Arendt). They are unable to catch the world, to represent it and understand it which forces them into paralysis. They are trapped in collective images which do not correspond to them.

The characters of *In Praise of Hatred* are similarly trapped in collective images. The figure of terrorist can be built from four characters: Bakr, Houssam, the narrator and Abdallah.

The narrator is a young girl who lives with her aunts in her grand-father's house. Abdallah is one of the narrator's uncles by marriage. He is Yemeni and met Bakr, another uncle of the narrator, while travelling. He was raised by a father who sold carpets and other goods for tourists. But while at the university, Abdallah joined a communist circle and engaged in political activism. He stopped his study, destroying forever his father's dream to see him becoming a doctor. He went to Russia in exile before meeting Bakr and helping him in his battle in Syria. After Bakr's subsequent exile and the violent repression ordered by the government, Abdallah met a CIA agent and began working for the CIA in Afghanistan. (The parallel with Ben Laden is clearly made.) Abdallah is the only one to encourage the narrator in her fundamentalism and to express his pride when she is imprisoned for her activism. He will never renounce to the fight, even after being close to death and losing a dear friend.

Bakr followed the same path as Abdallah's until a disagreement with the fundamentalist Organization for which they both work forces him to exile. In London, he looks backward in his life and begins to doubt of the accuracy of his commitment. He feels responsible for the death of his nephew Houssam (the narrator's brother), whom he engaged with him in the Organization. He feels also responsible for his sister's death (Houssam's mother), who died because of the pain caused by her son's death. When the narrator met him again in London, she found a tortured man, disillusioned by the political commitment and full of guilt.

The more symbolic character is Houssam, the narrator's brother. He is engaged in the same Organization for which Bakr and Abdallah work. His implication

in this group pushes him to perpetrate a murder. He hides for a long time, during which he becomes conscious of his error and tries to convince his sister (the narrator) to abandon the female fundamentalist Organization where she is and to return to her studies. He is tortured by the murder he perpetrated. He is finally arrested and imprisoned, and then dies when the government organizes a mission consisting in killing all the prisoners detained where he is. He is the younger fundamentalist in the novel, and the first killed. We have little information about him. The narrator admires her brother and wants to be like him. She says she is obsessed and fascinated by him. He gives her his school books and she discovers messages of hatred in the margins of one of them. She nourishes her own hatred from them, cultivating an idealized image of her brother because he is mostly absent, in hiding and acting in the shadows:

I had read all of Houssam's margins notebooks, considered all his drawings scribbled on the chemistry book. (...) Houssam's annotations were a message for me, they made up for the many years of silence between us. He had left me the margins of his books to read so I could understand his pain. He aspired to martyrdom as the only way to God, his frail body could no longer contain his soul. His burning words, his threats of the Apocalypse against the infidels made me fear for him, not to mention the religious hymns that I had never heard of before, that urged the mujahedeen to death. I missed him so much; we were so hard toward one another, like strangers. We met with nothing to share, without bothering to exchange a word. I missed him but I was not looking for him, I watched him in silence when he entered my grand-father's house troubled.

He is an obsession, before and after his death, for the narrator and for Bakr. As it was the case for Jaguar, we never see him in his ordinary life, we learn about him through what other characters say about him. After the murder, nobody sees him despite the narrator.

The parallel between the character of Abdallah and Ben Laden conveys a stereotyped image of the terrorist, perceived here as the only stubborn character: he remains persuaded of the necessity of the fight, never disturbed by the loss of friends or by the imprisonment of his niece at such a level that he could question his way of life. Even at the end, he persists in his commitment.

But where Abdallah is presented in a monolithic way as a terrorist, Bakr and Houssam are also perceived as victims of the manipulation of the Organization, victims of their hope for change that they only believed was possible through the use of violence. They are physical victims, Houssam being killed when he is in jail; Bakr suffering physically from his forced exile.

The narrator, who has no name, embodies all those dimensions, and draws her personality from the other characters. She is a terrorist from the perspective of the Syrian government and society because of her implication in the Organization's activities but also because of her parental links with Bakr, Houssam and Abdallah. She seems to have no control over her life, unable to decide who she is or even who she wants to be. She is a victim of the times, of a tyrannical government and of a family full of hatred.

Whereas the attributes of the terrorist and the victim are conveyed through stereotyped descriptions in Walter's novel, in Khalifa's work they are conveyed through stereotyped behaviors and discourses: the blind commitment of Bakr, Houssam and the narrator to the terrorist activities of the Organization, the discourse

of hatred developed in the margins of Houssam's school books and in the inner speech of the narrator. We read sentences about disfiguring girls with vitriol, others calling for martyrdom, and so on because it is what one says and thinks when one is part of that kind of group. The ideological discourse of the Organization fits the stereotyped image spread by popular cultural production over recent years, trying to persuade people that only zealots commit themselves to those terrorist activities.

As March Selios in *The Zero*, the narrator's mother embodies the pure innocent victim who will not be reminded after the events, becoming a ghost behind which a crowd of dead people is hidden.

The unnamed narrator of Khalifa's novel embodies the contemporary Syrian subject in crisis. She is the symbol of a collective situation. As Jaguar and Remy, she is a potential human, acting and speaking without investing ethically her humanity. She suffers from dysfunctions in her relationship to the world and in her mode of expression and communication; she does not know who she is, what her principles, her deep convictions are. She has no identity, no name.

The construction of the characters in both novels questions the reader about his or her own perception and criteria used to decide whether a character is a terrorist or a victim, forcing him to recognize that it can be both at the same time. As it is the result of a process of appropriation, a protean form built to be manipulated, they appear at a moment in the narration, in order to question the reader on his or her own cultural references and their legitimacy, and on the reader's humanity. The characters transformed in figures can be defigured in order to be refigured and thus can refer alternately to terrorist or victim, depending on the discourse presenting them, but they remain constantly objects of obsession and fascination.

The transformation of the characters into figures in such novels is a way to question the human and his relation to the world and the others. Presenting him as a lost character unable to find his place in the world or to communicate with others underlines the crisis in which he finds himself, a crisis of the contemporary subject which is linked to a crisis of the imaginary, of the relation between the individual and the world he lives in.

Salvoj Žižek warns anybody in his essay *Welcome to the Desert of Real* not to attribute thoughts and wishes to others:

There are two lessons to be drawn from this ideological constellation. First, we should be careful not to attribute to the Other the naive belief we are unable to sustain, transforming him or her into a "subject supposed to believe". Even a case of the greatest certainty – the notorious case of the "Muslim fundamentalist" on a suicide mission – is not as conclusive as it may appear: is it really so clear that these people, at least, must "really believe" that, after death, they will wake up in heaven with seventy virgins at their disposal (...)? What if, however, they are terribly unsure about their belief, and they use their suicidal act as a means of resolving this deadlock of doubt by asserting this belief (...)? (Žižek, 154).

The reversal of perception proposed by Salvoj Žižek here is radical, but it strikes the mind and intensifies his warning. What I keep from this passage is that we

cannot be sure of the reasons which push an individual to become a suicide bomber. This aspect of contemporary terrorism reveals a crisis of the imaginary considered as a platform of interaction between the individual and the world.

On this platform, the individual creates representations (as figures for instance) in order to catch the world, to understand it, control it, submit it to the human mind. But terrorism resists understanding; the imaginary cannot assume its role.

Novels are manifestations of the activity produced in the imaginary. Fictions about terrorism describe dead-end situations and represent characters lost in their lives and worlds, unable to go beyond the traumatic event. It is a kind of *mise en abyme* of the crisis, an attempt to represent what resists representation. But it is not a desperate attempt because the result is the creation of a work of fiction, a manifestation of the activity produced in the imaginary and a mean of communication.

The characters are figures because they are astounded and act in an incomprehensible way, thus they obsessed the reader.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt identifies the human characteristics to be speech and action. But it is not enough to speak and to act to be human. Each individual has to be conscious of the value of these characteristics in order to invest them ethically. In other words, each individual has to speak and act with being conscious that it is what makes them human.

The characters of Jess Walter's novel and Khaled Khalifa's are deprived of this consciousness, and do not succeed in speaking and acting according to their principles, to their humanity. They possess these capacities but cannot invest them ethically. They are paralyzed and seemed to pass through life without living. They are spectators of their own life, of their role in society.

They are all victims of their condition, trying to regain their humanity. But what the novels seem to suggest is that this reinvestment is impossible without violence and death: they kill themselves with others, they are killed by others, or they wait to be killed by themselves or others.

The aim of terrorism is to paralyze people by terror, to prevent them to overcome trauma, and to think about future. It is not an apocalyptic event, but a threat of worst acts in the future.

Writing and reading is an attempt to put what presents itself as incomprehensible at distance, in order to frame it, control it, represent it, understand it and eventually overcome it thanks to the imaginary. But terrorism resist imaginary, and the attempt to represent it ends in a representation of the inability of the imaginary which has been scattered by terrorism. But representing the crisis of contemporary imaginary can be considered as the first step to overcome this crisis.

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Notes

ُ(my translation) خليفة, خالد. مديح الكراهية, دار الآداب, 104-105

[&]quot;قُرأت هوامشُ كُتب حسام ورسوماً خربشُ ها على كتاب الكيمياء (...) ما كتبه حسام كان رسالة إلي تعويضا عن صمتنا سنوات طويلة وعدم البوح بأسرارنا كأي صديقين , ترك لي هوامش كتبه كي أقرأها وأعرف كم هو معذب , يتوق إلى الشهادة في سبيل الله , لم يعد جسمه النحيل يحتمل روحه , خفت عليه من كلماته النارية وتوعده للكفار بيوم حساب قريب , بالإضافة إلى أناشيد دينية لم أسمع بها من قبل , تحرض المجاهدين على الموت , اشتقت إليه , كم كنا قساة كأننا غريبان , نمر قرب بعضنا بعضا , لا أحد فينا يتمهل كي نتبادل الأسرار واللحظات التافهة كي نمنحها قيمة, اشتقت له ولم أبحث عنه, راقبته بصهت حين دخل إلى منزل جدي منفعلا"