Tele-visioning Terror

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Synopsis

This paper is devoted to the relationship between terrorism and media, with a special focus on the theoretical notions of "icon", "mass" and "distance". It aims to show how the phenomenon of modern terrorism calls into question the essence of modern democracies and their systems of information, based on the distance between *vision* and *event*.

Biography

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Essay

The notion of modern terrorism emerges in the 18th century as a technique of government, while in the 19th century this phenomenon encounters a shift of perspective and designates an action *against* the State instead of an action *of* the State[*]. During the 20th century several new forms of terrorism come into being and evolve together with the emergence of simultaneity, ubiquity and over-information of mass media: "Modern terrorism begins with modern media" (Huyghe, *Terrorisme, médias, violence: histoire de la communication*). In this paper I would like to analyze the link between media and terrorism, pointing out the relationship between icon and terror but also putting it in dialogue with the birth of modern democracies and the contemporary notion of "mass". Indeed, the "terror" of terrorism can function only from a distance, building and controlling a community based on remote emotions, tele-brought, tele-guided, tele-visioned. What would be a terrorist act that wouldn't act from a distance? An act that would only occur in the time and space in which it occurs? Wouldn't it be reduced to a simple form of violence? If war can occur without media (because its objectives pre-exist to mass-media societies), could a non-media and non-spectacular terrorism exist? But also: how does information about terrorism look like since terrorism can't exist without information?

I would like to point out three decisive elements of modern and contemporary terrorism that are deeply connected to mass-media societies: *icon*, *mass* and *distance*. These three elements produce a particular type of event. I will try to detail how terrorism fails if at least one of these elements is missing. Media play a role as a component of terrorism since the beginning of its development, as anarchist terrorism in 19th century shows already, but the

birth of television adds a new important aspect, that is to say that with television terrorism's demands can be replaced by the *spectacle*, in the sense of Guy Debord's *La société du spectacle.* The "spectacularization" of violence becomes itself an objective, as if symbol replaced diplomacy, as Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin point out in their introduction to *The History of Terrorism from Antiquity to Al-Qaeda*:

> In the case of militant Islamism, the characteristic that sets it apart from all other movements, passed and present, is that it has nothing to negotiate (Chaliand-Blin 10).

I shall first develop the question of the relationship among terror, icon and distance and after that I will try to investigate the relationship between the notions of "terror" and "mass".

1. Tele-visioning Terror: The Relationship Among Terror, Icon and Distance

The relationship between icon and terror can be observed in three mechanisms:

- Pursuing visibility: the "society of the spectacle" makes violent, terrifying and traumatic contents attractive through the use of media. Any terrorist attack or assassination attempt literally enters the merchandise system through the birth of press photography. The analysis of the relationship between photography and terrorism proposed by Fabrice d'Almeida for the Years of Lead in Italy reflects a tight connection which is obviously not limited to the Italian case (210-232).
- Producing terror through memory stimulation: the audience, definitely a group of *spectatores-receptores*, memorizes images easier than speech, as it is accustomed to the process of representation. Moreover, memorization is facilitated by repetition: Jacques Derrida, for example, analyzes the figure of the *loop* ("boucle" in French) in relation to the way in which media depicted 9/11 (Derrida 188, endnote 8). A terrifying "victimary" memory is produced, even more so as it acts from "an im-presentable to come (*à venir*)" (Derrida 97), as Derrida points out when he talks about subjects that are "traumatized from the umpresentable future" (Derrida 98) and the "possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come – though worse" (Derrida 97).
- Transforming, through the use of images, information into "information-emotion": the use of images allows to build up a *community of emotion* in a short amount of time, and to control, somehow, the emotions of the masses in order to avoid political, historical, etc. analyses of the event. Moreover, this process lets us labour under the illusion that we assist directly to the event and that we do it collectively, as an experience shared by a large amount of people, so to shape what we could call a *public feeling*. The image enables to blur the distinction among information, analysis, sharing of emotions and interpretation.

For example, the Italian Red Brigades systematized the link between photography and kidnapping (D'Almeida 220), particularly in the Moro Affair. During the Years of Lead, photography, propaganda posters and advertising aimed at the mobilization, making use of the mechanism of terror. As in other cases, text was subordinated to (when not replaced by) image.

The relationship between terror and distance needs a prior distinction between *violence* and *terror*, as violence and terror are characterized by different spatiotemporal coordinates. *Distance* is, literally and symbolically, an intrinsic property of terror, since terror caused by terrorism acts beyond the boundaries of the place and the moment in which it is exerted. It persists in time and spreads throughout space. Terrorist terror is conceived and executed in order to make people know about it, which is very different from other kinds of violence and barbary, such as German and Russian concentration camps, torture, private murder, etc. As Régis Debray states in *Le passage à l'infini*, terrorism can be described as a

> "Series of violent acts, says the French dictionary Le Petit Robert, that a political organization executes in order to disturb the population and engender a collective feeling of insecurity". What would a violent act be, even a paroxysmal one, if it ended together with its victims in the moment and in the place in which it occurs, without "disturbing" anyone else, without *acting at a distance*? Terror is worth only if it makes noise; its efficiency in time and space grows together with the development of communication devices (Debray 7).

That's why, according again to R. Debray, terrorism "can be analyzed as a form of *media radicalism*" (10). Forty years before, in 1962, international relations specialist Raymond Aron proposed a definition of terrorism which has become famous since: "An action of violence is labeled 'terrorist' when its psychological effects are out of proportion to its purely physical result" (Aron 170). Consequently, in my opinion, two questions should be raised:

1. Is the camera of world televisions the cause or the consequence of violence and terror? Would terror occur without a camera? And, if yes, would it still be terror? French philosopher and mediologist Monique Sicard uses the term "coevolution" (147) to describe the tight connection between terror and the image of terror, between the camera and the acts of violence executed with terroristic purposes.
2. Second question: is information about terrorism possible? Couldn't terrorism be considered as the phenomenon marking the failure of information, precisely because of its indissoluble link with mass-media?

Since there is an indissoluble link of coevolution between information and event, the *condition of exteriority*, so to say, that is inherent in the concept of information itself is not satisfied anymore. Information then fails in its essence and sense. This does not necessarily mean that information causes the event, even if this can happen when this process is pushed to the limits, but in many other cases the relation of ambiguity (i.e. the covering up of the cause-effect logic) is enough to make information fail, or, at least, to make its legitimacy problematic.

2. The Relationship between Terror and Mass

As Pierre-Bernard Huyghe states: "The word terrorism (if not the thing itself) is contemporary of the first mass ideologies and of the first means of communication for the masses" (Huyghe, *Entre ravage et message* 44). Modern terrorism mostly targets the civil population, directly or indirectly, as the destiny of civil population can modify the decisions of political leaders. Or well the advent of mass democracies makes political leaders keen on the destiny of civil populations, as Gérard Chaliand and Bernard Blin remind us in their introduction to *The*

History of Terrorism (19). Now, the destiny of civil populations not only affects the choices of political leaders, but it also justifies, to the eyes of the civil populations themselves, decisions taken by political leaders that would otherwise be unacceptable. Chaliand and Blin, again:

> This explains why terrorism is employed with more efficiency against democracies than against dictatures […] The impact of a terrorist attack is not the same in a free country as in countries where the population don't have a say in the matter and where media are completely state-controlled. We could argue that modern terrorism is partly a consequence of democracy (Chaliand and Blin 19).

This is actually what Guy Debord already maintained in the Eighties in his *Comments on the society of the spectacle*, where he details the link between terrorism and democracy. His idea is that modern democracies in the societies of the spectacle produce their own enemy: terrorism.

> Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results. The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic (Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 24).

Following Derrida when he underlines in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* the historical link between the end of the Cold War and 9/11 (92-93; 98-99), we could argue that the recent Islamist terrorism has filled the emptiness left by the disappearance of the big enemy. The dissemination-globalization of today's terror has replaced the Balance of Terror during the Cold War.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to highlight three ideas that, in my opinion, deserve a special attention:

1. Terrorism is partly a consequence of democracy.
2. Terrorism reveals the failure of the concept of mass-media information, based on audience and spectacle.
3. Terrorism shows the deep logic of the mass-media system, that is to say the reduction of the event to its image and its representation within the screen: as a matter of fact, contemporary terrorism can be labeled as it is only if it is tele-visioned, which doesn't only mean "visioned on a TV or computer screen", but also, to go back to the etymological sense of "television", visioned from a distance.

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* See for example the entry "Terrorism" in the French on-line dictionary *Trésor de la langue française informatisé* (<http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=3977428035;>) or the historical analysis of this term proposed by François-Bernard Huyghe: <http://www.huyghe.fr/actu_210.htm>. Web 18 Dec. 2011.