The Martyr's Vision:
Why the Suicide Bomber's Eye Is Cast Not to the Sky – but to the Other!

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Synopsis

The suicide bomber lies outside the contingencies of religion and the promise of sex with 72 virgins. Instead, her desire lies squarely in the quest for inclusion in the field of vision and to count as a human being. This paper proposes an alternative critical discourse to the question of identity-based suffering and culpability. It aims to raise doubts about certain established notions concerning historical trauma that are thought to be singular, unrepeatable, and the result of fixed dichotomies. Instead, I wish to call for a rejection of the notion of competitive suffering and of culpability as limited to the group perpetrating the last act of violence.

Biography

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Essay
1   The Muslim at Auschwitz

The Muselmann was described by Holocaust survivors as the Auschwitz prisoner who has given up and was given up by his comrades: "no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual ... He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions" (Agamben, 41).

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben characterizes the Muselmann as a stage that Auschwitz inmates reach when they are in such a state of physical decrepitude that other inmates would look at them almost as dead already. Agamben quotes Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi describing the Muselmann by saying, "One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death" (44).

The Muselmann becomes the threshold between the states of life and death, but more importantly between the categories of human and inhuman. Deprived of all of dignity and moral compositions as human, there remains a faint biological connection between Muselmann and its species. Not a "living being" anymore, he is a walking corpse, non-human, living dead, and mummy-man (Agamben 54). To Agamben, the Muselmann "is the guard on the threshold of a

new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends" (69). He was cast outside the gaze; no one bears to look at him. In other words, he became a counter Medusa, who gazes at no one, but one who cannot be gazed at either. Before the Muselmann was cast into the gas chamber, he was already outside the gaze, "unbearable to the human eye" (Agamben 50). This inability to look at the Muselmann is not one of sympathy or abundance of compassion, but rather because he was unworthy of being looked at. The Muselmann was a source of anger and worry (Agamben 43).

Primo Levi describes the Muselmann as "he who has seen the Gorgon." According to Agamben, a Gorgon is a faceless "female head covered with serpents whose gaze produced death" (53). The Gorgon had no eyes and merely by looking at it, one would be killed.

But where did the term Muselmann come from? How was it that the Muselmann became a separate being from his former self? Agamben clearly states that the word der Muselmann means Muslim, literally, and uses the two terms interchangeably (41). However, Agamben also explains that although there is little certainty about the origin of the term, it is evident that it was used at Auschwitz possibly as a reference to the image of a Muslim prostrating himself on the ground in prayer—all curled up with his face touching the ground. The word Muselmann may also be referring to the Muslims' belief in submitting to the will of God and, as such, are seen as losing their will and surrendering to fate.

Auschwitz inmates had to invent a new category for their Jewish identity as it began to descend into the state of non-human, an identity that does not resemble one's original self, but one that is categorically different. Agamben notes, "It is certain, that with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews" (45). In other words, the Jews who were targeted solely for their religious identity, in order to affirm the solidity of this identity, needed to invent an Other (The Muslim) to whom they can ascribe the degeneration of their own as they descend into the non-human state/stage of the Muselmann.

The Jew, in that state, has become the Muslim. The Jew is stripped down to the remnant of his or her biological existence of the body as "bare life," thus becoming not a Jew anymore but a Muselmann. One may wonder, why has the Muslim become the alterity of the Jewish inmates at Auschwitz? Has the Muslim, a descendant of Ishmael, not been the Jew's brother all along? Both sons of Abraham, the father of all? Was Moses not an Egyptian?

Could one consider this division of Jewish identity as the product of a "Western" perspective that has burdened itself with Otherness, once as perceived in the Jew, and a further Otherness as perceived in the Muslim? It is as if Othello was Shylock's tormentor in the European fantasies of Otherness. Was Othello, a paranoid and violent man of war, meant to be the tragic counterpoint to Shylock's comedy of greed?

2 Jewish Kebab in Baghdad

Where else do the Jew and the Arab meet? Don't they meet in the person of the Arab Jew? Israeli scholar Ella Shohat, in "Reflections of an Arab Jew,"

excavates the figure of the Arab Jew, a term that to many in the West is seen more like a paradox. Shohat argues, however, that until the establishment of the state of Israel, the Arab Jew has been a fundamental part of the socio-economic, cultural, and even political life in many communities throughout the Middle East, and along with Arab Muslims and Arab Christians, developed through the centuries a common cultural identity that is imprinted with the sounds, sites, and aromas of the region.

The life of the Jew as an Arab was richly, albeit romantically, described in *Memories of Eden: A Journey through Jewish Baghdad,* by Violette Shamash. She speaks tenderly of the luscious life she experienced as a young person within the vibrant Jewish community of Baghdadi Jews in Iraq before 1945. Shamash describes her life as "paradise" (19). She paints a tender, though idyllic, portrait of the city as seen from her family mansion on the banks of the Tigris characterized by the fragrance of walnut and apricot trees in the garden with kebabs being grilled on a tanoor oven. Shamash traces her Jewish community in Iraq back to Babylonian history as the home of "our patriarch Abraham" and the birthplace of the Talmud (95).

In *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*, Sasson Somekh writes of his youth in Baghdad, describing details of the education he received in Arabic from a Shia cleric and how it started his interest in writing Arabic poetry as a teenager. Somekh's memoir recounts his life as a writer involved in the political and cultural life of his Baghdad, meeting other writers in cafés on al-Rashid Street and sharing in the city's vibrant cultural scene. As in Shamash's story, Somekh also notes the role played by the rise of Zionism and Nazism as a strong factor in bringing out Jewishness as a marker of difference in the life of Iraqi Jews. He also unveils the complicit role of the Israeli, British, and Iraqi governments in facilitating the emigration of Iraqi Jews through secret agreements, false propaganda, local fascist gangs, and even terrorist operations by the Mossad in Iraq.

In "Reflections by an Arab Jew," Ella Shohat points out Israel's systematic discrimination against Mizrahis (and Sephardic Jews in general) through state "institutions that deployed their energies and material to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent disadvantage of Oriental Jews."

Oriental Jews constitute 50% of Israel's Jews, and when you add the indigenous Palestinian residents, Israelis who do not come from a European background total greater than 70% of the whole population. Nevertheless, Shohat notes that much of the cultural and educational systems in Israel were set without any consideration of the Oriental Jews' identity and with only European Jews in mind:

> Stripped of our history, we have been forced by our no-exit situation to repress our collective nostalgia, at least within the public sphere. The pervasive notion of "one people" reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before Israel. We have never been allowed to mourn a trauma that the images of Iraq's

destruction only intensified and crystallized for some of us. (Shohat, "Reflections")

Arab Jews in Israel were made to learn a whole new history (of the European Jews) that was not necessarily their experience. Further betrayed by their language (they speak Arabic at home) and their own physiognomy, they are often mistaken for Palestinians and subsequently profiled as such and at times attacked by some or arrested for questioning by the authorities.

Here, bio-politics perverts its way into the Jewish imagination one more time. As the European Jew, interned at Auschwitz, subjected to unthinkable trauma, began to degenerate physically into the Muselmann, here in the Jewish state, the Oriental Jew, likewise, lends his body to the Muslim, deprived of freedom, reduced to an inmate because here too, the Jew's body is indistinguishable from that of an Arab. The eye that accuses the Palestinian also accuses his mimesis in the Oriental Jew.

In her earlier work, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims" (1988), Shohat explores in postcolonial terms the ways that Oriental Jews have been treated with prejudice by European Jews in Israel in ways reminiscent of the same colonialist and Orientalist terms that Europeans used with colonized nations, treating them as undercivilized, barbaric, and even sub-human. She contrasts the cultural and historical backgrounds of Arab Jews with European Jews, as representative of separate and uneven cultural domains. European Jews are the ones who imagined Zionism to solve the European problem of anti-Semitism and built the state of Israel in their own image. As such, they came to dominate the cultural, educational, and political discourse in the new state of Israel, and therefore, exercised the same Orientalist approach of Europeans towards Orientals in general.

In "Sephardim in Israel," Shohat notes that an "essential feature of colonialism is the distortion and even denial of the history of the colonized"(7). In this framework, she also explains that along the discriminatory propaganda of Israeli mainstream media, the Oriental Jew has been represented as backward, living in caves, unsuitable to modern life. Contrasted with that image, she posits, one should keep in mind the Metropolises from which many Oriental Jews came from: Alexandria, Baghdad, and Istanbul, which "were hardly the desolate backwaters without electricity or automobiles implied by the official Zionist account" (Shohat, "Sephardim" 7). She explains,

> Yet Sephardic and Palestinian children, in Israeli schools, are condemned to study a history of the world that privileges the achievements of the West, while effacing the civilizations of the East … The Zionist master-narrative has little place for either Palestinian or Sephardim, but while Palestinians possess a clear counter narrative, the Sephardic story is a fractured one embedded in the history of both groups. (Shohat, "Sephardim" 7)

3   The Untestifiable Martyrdom of Thicklips

In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Shylock had the opportunity to defend his outlandish ransom for a pound of flesh, his defense was to raise the humanity of the Jew as manifested in his corporeality, his biological composition, which he shares with all other human beings, Christians, and others:

> . . . … I am a Jew. Hath
> not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
> dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
> the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
> to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
> warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
> a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
> if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison
> us, do we not die?   (Act III, scene I) (Shakespeare, *Merchant*)

Along the same line, and contrary to Shylock's reasoning, the physical attributes of Othello (the other Venetian outsider) were repeatedly pointed at as signifiers not of semblance but of Otherness and alterity. In the play, Othello is described as "a Barbary horse" and "an old black ram." He is referenced as "thicklips" and as having "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (all Act 1, scene 1) (Shakespeare, *Othello*).

Unlike the European Jew, Othello's physiognomy becomes a visible marker of difference and a disparaging sign of Otherness. Othello's Otherness is all too visible. Therefore, Othello had to be abjected outside of vision. In that sense, Othello's role as a soldier on behalf of the Venetian state is emphasized as the person whose place is supposed to die for others, and whose station is just one behind death. Othello the Moor, like the Muselmann, is viewed as non-human, and one who is implicated in their own death in the form of self-sacrifice.

 At the concentration camp, the Muselmann is visibly invisible. He is not dead, but seen as such. When he became Muselmann, the inmate crossed over to where he would not be counted as human any longer, but only as "bare life." Agamben describes the Muselmann as the "untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness" (Agamben 41).

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben quotes many survivors who wanted to stay alive specifically because they wanted to be a witness to the atrocities committed at the camp. What they have seen, although unsayable, must be told. In fact, survivors, like Primo Levi, have felt a constant compulsion to tell their story for a lifetime. But who testifies for that which no one bears to testify about?

Indeed, at the beginning of the chapter "Witness," Agamben quotes an Auschwitz prisoner asserting that he would not take his own life because he "did not want to suppress the witness that I could become" (15). Witness in this sense is probably taken in the narrow sense of seeing coupled with the functional sense of testifying. But we already know that there are parallels between the act of

witnessing and the act of martyrdom. The martyr as witness is a condition that intertwines the act of seeing with that of the witness's certain death.

In both Greek and Arabic, the word for martyr has direct ontological roots in the word for "witness": "Martis" in Greek, "Shaheed" in Arabic. A "witness" is someone who has seen but who also bears the imperative of testifying to what was seen. A martyr, as witness, accepts that his or her testimony will lead to their death, and as such, could be seen as implicated in his or her own self-sacrifice through the 'act' of testifying. The Bible refers to the act of witnessing as both following Christ as well as witnessing the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Martyrdom, then, could be described as the act of willingly getting involved in a physical situation where the martyr knows that by advocating certain principles (testifying to what he or she believes is "truth"), the martyr will be giving up his or her life. In other words, by knowing fully and well in advance that his or her testimony will lead to death, the martyr is implicated in his or her own sacrifice through the act of testifying.

The emphasis that I'd like to make here is on the apparent oppositions that one may find along the states of living, witnessing, and martyrdom. These states seem to resolve around the fourth state of **action**—since which state a person may end up in crucially depends on the action (or non-action) chosen. I argue that there is an inherent split in the notion of martyrdom between testifying and sacrifice and that at the core of this split has been the question of action.

The martyr is a person who has decided to sacrifice his or her own life so others could live, and one who has given up his or her dignity so that others may have dignity. In a way, a martyr, like a hero, is a description given by the beneficiaries of the martyr's actions to those who willingly give up their own lives with the hope that others will not have to.

A martyr's testimony is delivered not in the narrow sense of a verbal witness but in the corporeal sense of delivering one's body as evidence. As such, the Muselmann's position at the concentration camp pushed to the thresholds of the non-living could be contrasted by that other Arab/Muslim at that other camp, the refugee camp. The Arab at the Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank casts a different kind of gaze to his own predicament and locates his own body as a site of action and resistance.

4   But Whose Blood is it, Anyway?

Primo Levi, the Auschwitz witness par excellence, less than 40 years after his release, found himself confronted with the moral obligation to speak in support of residents of another camp: the Palestinian refugee camps. Commenting on the aftermath of the massacre of civilians at the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Levi located the Jew in the Muslim, once more. He wrote: "Everybody is somebody's Jew. And today the Palestinians are the Jews of the Israelis" (qtd. in Butler "Primo").

In her biography of Levi entitled *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge* (1995), Mirna Cicioni underlines Levi's moral obligation as a witness to Auschwitz in the making of such a clear and direct connection. She says that Levi "implicitly

acknowledged that he was being asked to speak as an Auschwitz survivor as well as an internationally famous writer and agreed to do so to counteract the ideological use of the Holocaust by the Israeli ruling class as a justification of its attempt to wipe out the Palestinian people" (Cicioni 129). Cicioni quotes Levi as saying in an interview to the Italian newspaper *La Republica*:

> I am torn apart, also because I know very well that Israel was founded by people like me, who were less lucky than I was. Men with the Auschwitz number tattooed on their arms, homeless and countryless ... who found a home and a country over there. I know all this. But I also know that this is Begin's argument. And I do not recognise this argument as valid. (Cicioni 128-129)

On the other hand, Judith Butler, in "Primo Levi for the Present" (2006) marks Levi's clear and unequivocal moral objection to the insturmentalization of the Shoah to legitimize violence. Butler quotes Levi answer to a newspaper interviewer's question about whether he could see all the Jewish blood spilled in all these years, as saying: "I reply that the blood spilled pains me just as much as the blood spilled by all other human beings."

In the refugee camp, however, a new form of homo sacer is born, one who recognizes her own bio-power and who turns her own body, already a non-living bare life, a zero level of humanity, into a resurrection of the notion of sacrifice. This refugee understands such a state too well and becomes intent on threatening death itself instead of being the object of the threat of death by others.

The suicide bomber has witnessed her/his own inescapable state as homo sacer and realizes fully that her misery is outside the field of vision. Unable to sustain a life that does not recognize her humanity, she seems committed to answering a question asked by Shylock centuries ago. In a very simplistic perspective, one can see that a suicide bomber's action is cruel and insane that merely proves that both the Jew and the Palestinian bleed when you prick them and when you poison them they both die. By foregrounding the body, the suicide bomber violently and relentlessly attempts to suture the unnatural slit between the Jew and the Arab.

It is evidently naïve to fantasize about the suicide bomber as merely a religious fanatic duped with the promise of sex with 72 virgins. One would notice that the wave of suicide bombers in the Middle East started in 1985 when an attractive 18-year-old Lebanese sales clerk who works at a video store and a member of the secular Syrian Nationalist Party, Sana Mhaidali, drove a white Peugeot laden with explosives into an Israeli army convoy in Southern Lebanon. Mhaidali recorded a video message in which she appeared in military uniform, introduced herself by saying: "I am martyr Sana Mhaidali, I am 18 years old" and then went on to address her family and her countrymen to explain the patriotic reasons that drove her to become a human bomb. The specificity of video as the medium of her last testimony was meant as an eye opener, a dislocation of vision to the plight of a people who have been for years under foreign occupation.

Initial news reports, unable to comprehend Mhaidali's motivation, claimed that she was pregnant and wanted to hide her shame, or that she was severely depressed. Neither was true. Indeed, many who studied female suicide bombers have looked for uniquely female contingencies that would drive women to die: too young, psychologically disturbed, under male influence, revenge seeking, etc., only to find no single consistent explanation. According to Lindsey O'Rourke's August 2008 article in *The New York Times*, "There is precious little evidence of uniquely feminine motivations driving women's attacks."

In *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (2010), Robert Pape and James Feldman present the outcome of their work at Chicago's Project on Security and Terrorism. The report studied over 2,200 suicide attacks across the world for a period of about 30 years. Its findings categorically reject the association of religious fundamentalism as the key motivator of suicide bombers. The researchers found that 95% of all suicide attacks were carried out in response to foreign occupation, citing that 90% of worldwide attacks are anti-American in areas occupied by the U.S. and that there was a drop of 90% in suicide bombing in Israel after Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and large parts of the West bank (Pape and Feldman 240).

Pape and Feldman explain that the suicide bomber phenomenon is determined by two factors: first is perceived cultural difference between occupier and occupied (49) (which they narrowly define as religious), and the second is the existing of other forms of resistance prior to the appearance of suicide bombing. In that sense, suicide bombing becomes a weapon of last resort, when other attempts at resistance have failed (Pape and Feldman 24).

When Pape and Feldman look at the ensuing environment after the September 11 attacks, they note the emergence of a grand American narrative on terror that surfaced after the terrorist attacks. Since the 9/11 hijackers were all Muslims, it was easy to presume that Islamic fundamentalism was the central motivating force driving the 19 hijackers to kill themselves—in order to kill us. Within weeks after the attack, surveys of American attitudes show that this presumption was fast congealing into a hard reality in the public mind. Americans immediately wondered, 'Why do they hate us?' and many quickly came to the conclusion that it was because of who we are, our identity, and not what we do, our actions (Pape and Feldman 320).

The media generally followed with a concerted representation of "Fundamentalist Islam" as a staunch adversary of "Western" culture and supporter of terrorism against the American "way of life." The goal of forcible or at best interventionist transformation of Arab societies into Western democracies was advocated by political strategists like Richard Perle and David Frum in *An End to Evil* (2003) and Paul Wolfowitz and, among many, columnist by Fareed Zakaria, who wrote an article in *Newsweek* in which he stated, "The United States must help Islam enter the modern world." One would note that even in the case of Zakaria, who did not explicitly call for the use of military force, he still refers to "Islam," a religion, as the object of a U.S. intervention.

According to this narrative, the Muslims' lack of democracy and oppositional stand against "Western civilization" was a satisfactory (albeit

summary and quick) explanation for the motivations that drove the 9/11 terrorists. Therefore, it was "understandable" that America needed to strike back at al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, as it is currently "understandable" to place the whole American Muslim community on trial through the Congressional Commission on Radical Islam, chaired by Representative Peter King. The Commission aims to have the American Muslim communities "prove" that U.S. Muslims are not radicalized and that they are willing to cooperate with security forces. The underlying message one receives clearly is that a defense is necessary because Muslim communities are radicalized and non-cooperative.

5   Smoke, Dreams, and Psychotherapy

It is quite telling that when a terrorist attack is conducted by a Muslim, automatically all focus is poured on the attacker's religious motivations and his deep hatred for America. A case in point is that of Faisal Shahzad, dubbed the Times Square bomber, who in court made multiple religiously infused statements that referred to his actions as being in defense of his "people."

Jared Lee Loughner, on the other hand, is the Tucson, Arizona, resident who launched a massacre, killing six people and injuring sixteen on January 8, 2011. Unlike the surety and finality that seems to have been rendered in Shahzad's motivations, reviewers of Loughner's action seem more perplexed by Loughner's motivations and psychological conditions. The various media representations of Loughner were not only one of shock and disbelief but also (because of this incredulity) almost imbued with an air of veiled exoneration as detected in the insistence of reviewers to dig deeply into Loughner's biography, his relationship with schoolmates, his recent work, his library visits, his marijuana use, smoking, etc. We see interviews of Loughner's family distraught at his terrible actions and begin to question if it is possible that one of "us" could have done this terrible crime against us. It was not one of "them" this time. Therefore, something must be wrong in what we perceive and not in the action itself. Loughner was eventually described as a delusional paranoid and ordered by the court to undergo psychological examination.

One wonders why the terrorist who happens to be a Muslim is considered without history, no friends, no family, no psychological background, no marijuana. Why is it that we find it quite easy to simplify the Muslim and accept his "fundamentalism" as his singular proof of culpability?

Major Nidal Hassan, a Virginia native and army psychiatrist, on November 19, 2009, just one day before his deployment to Afghanistan, went on a shooting rampage at the Soldier Readiness Center of Fort Hood, Texas, killing thirteen people and wounding thirty. Hassan's coverage in the media was limited to references to his Palestinian ancestry, his Islamic religious beliefs, and an underachieving career as a psychiatrist. Again, no family photo albums, no personal history, no marijuana. It is as if the Muslim terrorist not only has seen the Gorgon but has also become the faceless Gorgon itself, that which cannot be looked at, but is understood to be the source of terror.

Could Nidal Hassan be seen as an echo of Frantz Fanon, a psychoanalyst, born in the French colony of Martinique, French educated, and in

the service of the colonizing French army in Algeria? One wonders about the psychological and intellectual traversal that went through Fanon, already a colonial soldier fighting those with similar skin tone who are colonized like him. Fanon crosses to the other side, as the head of a psychiatric hospital in Algeria, but only to eventually join the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha notes that Fanon "discovered the impossibility of his mission as a colonial psychiatrist" (58). Bhabha quotes Fanon: "If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization" … (58).

Fanon had maintained that since colonialism was built and sustained with violence, it could be destroyed only by violence. But violence reveals its face in multiple ways. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Zizek points out that the Real in its extreme violence is "the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality" (5-6). One can understand Zizek's statement as an unveiling of a capitalist structure, which camouflages systems of exploitation and dehumanization under media images of happy consumerism and hyperreal modes of economic and social existence.

Western narcissism may have caused many to believe that Western civilization is not only the object of terrorism but also its sole subject; not only that the U.S. faces the dangers of terrorism today, but that terrorism did not materially exist before September 11. Such disconnect from history fails to note that many "liberation movements" in the world as late as the 1970s had adopted violence as the means to effect social change. These groups had similar ideological agendas but still operated with local focus. They included the Baadr-Meinhof gang in Germany, the Red Brigade in Italy, ETA in Spain, the IRA in Ireland, the PLO in Palestine, and the Japanese Red Army.

Zizek relates the birth of such groups to the failure of European student movements of the late sixties that demonstrated:

> that the masses were so deeply immersed in their apolitical
> consumerist stance that it was not possible to awaken them
> through standard political education and consciousness-raising - a
> more violent intervention was needed to shake them out of their
> ideological numbness, their hypnotic consumerist state, and only
> direct violent interventions like bombing supermarkets would do the
> job. (Zizek 9)

Zizek claims that "the same holds, on a different level, for today's fundamentalist terror?" He asks: "Is not its goal also to awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our - everyday ideological universe?" (Zizek 9)

Zizek finds that violence, delivered by so-called "fundamentalist terrorists," to be a revelatory act that aims at penetrating through the spectacularrity of everyday social reality. This revelatory act reveals a "passion for the Real" that

we are not supposed to experience directly—almost like the face of the Gorgon. What we experience in our everyday life is a virtual reality, he posits. It is a reality without its substance. Zizek says, "… just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization?" (16) In that sense, one's experience of coffee is no longer directly related to coffee itself but to what one is told (by the media, marketing systems, etc.) is expected to be coffee, or coffee as it "should" be. It is where an "idea" sits in and replaces something else, and as such, alters and completes one's experience. In the short story, *The Exactitude of Science*, Borges imagines an empire where a full-scale map was devised and eventually replaced the actual geography of the country. Our experience of the map becomes a replacement and substitution for the geographical experience of the country itself. In the same way, our experience of "fake" coffee is quite inconsequential, because it is dependent on what we are told is standing for "the ideal" of coffee (notwithstanding that decaffeinated coffee, from Zizek's example, is still coffee, but one that has been processed to remove from it what is undesirable).

Observing the spectacular nature of the attack on the World Trade Center, Zizek notes that the video footage of the attack has the characteristics of the effects of a Hollywood catastrophe movie. In a way, he posits, it felt like a catastrophe movie that we could have watched before. He finds that we were experiencing this "real reality" as a "virtual entity." Zizek refers to the compulsion to repeatedly watch images of the collapse of the Twin Towers as "jouissance at its purest" (12). However, he also points to the all revealing realization that "It was when we watched the two WTC towers collapsing on the TV screen, that it became possible to experience the falsity of TV shows'" (Zizek 11)—a point similarly raised by Baudrillard in the "Violence of the Image."

Zizek notes the surprising lack of TV images of the actual carnage at the WTC collapse: "—no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people" (13). He contrasts these images with "reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian men with their throats cut" (Zizek 13).

The repackaging of reality, Zizek finds out, is intended to control the piercing of the Real that was done by the terrorist attacks. This kind of representation is proof that even in this moment of trauma, there exists a distance between us and them, that "the real horror happens there not here." He says: "Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show" (Zizek 13). The insistence on distanciation between the contemporary Western citizen and the experience of historical trauma is felt clearly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when the use of the word "refugees" in the media to describe the displaced population of New Orleans was seen as an insult. President Bush was quoted as saying, "The people we're talking about are not refugees. They're Americans." Jesse Jackson went even further to say, "It is racist to call American citizens refugees" (MSNBC).

Zizek completely inverts this concept of distanciation between historical trauma and the Western psyche, and locates events like September 11 in "the twisted logic of dreams." He says that,

> it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen - and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality… . (Zizek 16)

If we were to go back to Shylock's assertion of sharing a common physiognomy with the European and the appropriation of this perspective by the terrorist for an emphatic reversal/demonstration of its truthfulness, we will find that what Zizek shows are layers of the Real and of dreams where our realities as humans are not simply exchanged as fantasies but also experienced as nightmarish visions of catastrophe.

Zizek tells a story in "The Smell of Love" about a famous Jewish ballerina who was asked to dance by the concentration camp officers "as a gesture of special humiliation." As she started to dance and was able to capture the officers' attention, Zizek says "she quickly grabbed the machine-gun from one of the distracted guards, and before being shot down herself, succeeded in killing more than a dozen officers" (142-143).

The above story, even if accurate, certainly belongs in the realm of fantasy and dreams. Zizek uses it as illustration of an "act" that undermines the "servicing of goods," one that interrupts the "reign of the pleasure-reality principle" (142). He finds that one could find another example of taking such an act in the passengers of the hijacked UA Flight 93 over Pennsylvania taking over the plane to prevent the killing of others even though this act will cost them their lives. This act, similar to the ballerina's act, may be viewed as part of a chain or relations in which both the passengers and hijackers are a part: An act of violence that will lead to their own sacrifice, and a nightmarish state of total destruction and mutual collapse.

What is evident is that the assertion of life has to be based on the recognition that life, all life, is precarious, and as such, precious, as posited by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). If the killing of any person is tantamount to the killing of all mankind, as quoted in the Quran, and if spilled blood, any person's blood, pains us, as stated by Primo Levi, it becomes necessary then to locate violence, any violence, as it violates life, as egregious and a source of terror.

Butler suggests that "specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (*Frames* 1).

This intelligibility of life could be seen in the Muselmann and in the refugee, in the news story that allocates a half front page for a white man

kidnapped in Colombia and a small third page column for dozens of Africans killed by civil war or by a natural disaster.[1] To understand these differentiations, Butler asks us to understand how meaning is constructed as the result of epistemological frames. Frames of war "are selective in carving up experiences that are essential to the war" (Butler, *Frames* 26). But by extending this notion to the questions of violence and the apprehension of life, one is confronted with the frame being extended to include all kinds of modes and manifestations of violence and counter violence.

It is necessary that one be aware of the essentialist nature of terms like terrorist, Muslim, Arab, Westerner, etc. since it is impossible to encompass all those who are referred to by these terms. Naturally, one can speak of Muslim terrorists, Tamil terrorists, and Basque terrorists, etc. But even Muslim terrorists may not necessarily be Arab or fundamentalist. They could be communist, secular, etc. As we have seen in the field work of Pape and Feldman, Lindsey O'Rourke, and others, it is not only problematic to theorize the suicide bomber, it is likewise difficult to categorize her or him. The temptation to find a unitary explanation that would blanket—cover all possible motivations is blatantly naïve and clearly futile. Terrorists could be motivated by a desire to sacrifice one's self so that others may benefit (at times even monetarily), or it could be that their motivation lies in hatred, fanaticism, ignorance, poverty, vengeance, idealism, etc. Attempts to categorize "terrorists" or "suicide bombers" under a single of classification or another could, therefore, merely function as a self-defeating generalization. As one theorizes the concept of suicide bombing, one should not ignore the fact that the instrument of terrorism, specular violence, is itself universal in its effect and in its experience, which is, in some ways, both the irony and the genius of the suicide bomber.

On the other hand, why could not the concept of violence, although multi-modal, also be viewed as a universal notion: The poison that kills the Jew is the same poison that kills the Arab? Butler emphasizes: "Precarity cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purpose of profit and territorial defense" (*Frames* 32). Butler, here, calls for a perspective that is capable of seeing that the application of (political) violence leads to the same results regardless of what is the cultural identity of its victim. The same could also be said about the cultural identity of the perpetrator.

In suffering and in aggression, there are commonalities, as well as there are commonalities between suffering and aggression. Beyond the intricacies of identity lie the precarity of life and the mutuality of culpability. The notions of victim and executioner are essential links in a Hegelian "long chain of conjunction," where "Victim and executioner are equally ignoble"[2] (Agamben 17). These notions are imbedded in the public imagination and, as part of the official narrative, are not immune to subversion. When Derrida received the Theodor Adorno award, on September 22, 2001, he commented on the attacks of September 11 by saying: "My unconditional compassion, addressed at the victims of September 11, does not prevent me from saying aloud: with regard to

this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless" (qtd. in Zizek 17). It is not only that Zizek's observation rings true: "ultimately, we are all Homo sacer" (100), but one needs to most decidedly keep in mind the constant complexity discovered at Auschwitz that "No group was more human than any other. . . the lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection" (Agamben 17).[3]

The realization that suffering is universal and that an instrumentalization that could exploit someone (or some group's) suffering in order to victimize others is a secondary victimization of the original victim because this instrumentalization becomes as disavowal of the meaning of suffering. Therefore, one could assert that the singularization of one's suffering as unique and unrepeatable could also as a repudiation of those who have suffered but belong to a different category. The project relentlessly proposed by Mahatma Gandhi in 1930 as a form of resistance still rings true and strong. Gandhi's foregrounding of the body, one's own, as a site of both sacrifice and public peril stands in contrast to an endless chain of victims and violators, who both deploy and assail the human body. In the same spirit, one notes that the current movements for freedom and democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere have decidedly moved away from violence, while at the same time did so through the position of being physically present in public at the peril of the violence of the state, the object of their resistance.

Notes

1   One should note that there are indeed few examples where events "overseas" are covered by the U.S. mainstream media that do not include an American getting murdered in Aruba or getting accused of murder in Italy. However, even in the Chilean miners' story, one is confronted by an ending that brings an American hero as the ultimate savior who manages to devise the impossible, but technically ingenious solution, to the miners' problem.

2   Agamben quoting Wolfgang Sofsky in *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camps*. (1997): Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 17.

3   Agamben quoting Wolfgang Sofsky in *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camps*. (1997): Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 17.

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