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Terror and Art: The Attack on Consciousness

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‘There is a curious affiliation between writers and artists’, remarks a voice in the video *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* by Johan Grimonprez, 1997. ‘In the West we become famous icons while our books lose the capacity to transform and influence. Years ago, I was still convinced that a novelist was able to change a culture’s inner life. Now that territory has been claimed by bomb makers and armed men. They pressurize human consciousness. Like writers did before we became completely assimilated.’¹ I don’t know if the artist ever had as much influence as the writer speaking in this quote from Don DeLillo; but the ambition was there. The twentieth-century avant-garde was especially eager to exert influence on a world scale. The revolution it desired had to be all-encompassing and in order to achieve it, human consciousness needed to be violently attacked. History’s hard-line lesson, however, was that the revolution was limited to the sphere of art where attacks are symbolic. At the close of the nineteen-seventies, some artists construed this to mean that art had to be traded, in a radical fashion, for concrete action against the establishment. Because in those same years, fledgling urban guerrillas like the Red Army Faction also sometimes dubbed their actions art, there briefly seemed to be a parallel in goals and methods.²

Although these paths have diverged since, and art is back on familiar ground, the avant-garde dream of influence and omnipotence has never entirely disappeared. With a degree of envy, artists have seen how, via the media, terrorists have succeeded in assailing human consciousness. This resounds in the response of German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen to the attacks of 11 September. He referred to the incident as ‘the greatest work of art in the entire cosmos’. Admiringly, he said of the terrorists: ‘Those are people who are so focused on one act, five thousand people are corralled towards resurrection in a single moment [...] something we composers cannot match. Many artists also attempt to exceed the boundaries of the conceivable to rouse us and open up another world for us’.³ Stockhausen was compelled to swallow his words with ferocious alacrity. But one year after the attacks, his words were echoed by Damien Hirst, albeit less dramatically. He felt that the incident could be seen as ‘kind of like an artwork in it’s own right’ and that, on one level, it was worth congratulating. But he, too, swiftly had to eat his words.⁴ But his response is understandable: the images of the burning Twin Towers are etched into our memory in a way seldom, if ever, achieved by works of art.

Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y is devoid of envy. With an interweaving of images from the media, home videos, propaganda and advertising, Grimonprez’ film is an inimitable narrative of the relationship between terrorism, political systems, consumption and the omnipotence of the media. The hi-jacking that is initially an amateurish and somewhat laughable enterprise becomes magnified and more maniacal as media attention increases, as if the sheer amount of images begs a higher bid. Ultimately, in Grimonprez’ vision, the image is victor: the testimony of two dazed tourists who accidentally capture the plummeting of a hi-jacked plane carries more weight for TV than the hi-jackers’ motives.

The film not only makes the influence of the media on our consciousness visible: their implacable force, which hijacks us more far resolutely than any terrorist, is also palpable in the work. The gruesome images, historical

fragments, obscure commentaries, commercials and bland cheery jingles keep you transfixed to the screen as proof of the medium's puissance. With this piece, Grimonprez doubly tackled the impregnable bulwark of TV: he exposes its working and simultaneously succeeds in turning the medium to his own hand. In the end, his video was sold to TV channels world wide.

Art is paltry, cynical, obtuse

The terror of the nineteen-seventies is also central to a series of works by Gerhard Richter. In the autumn of 1988 he produced a series of paintings on the Baader-Meinhof group. He comments on the paintings in his diary: '7 December, 1988. What have I painted? Three times a Baader, shot down. Three times Ennslin, hanging. Three times the head of the dead Meinhof after they'd cut her down. The dead Meins once. Ensslin three times, neutrally (almost like a pop star). And a large, non-specific funeral – a cell with a large bookcase – a silent grey record player – a portrait of a young Meinhof, sentimental in a bourgeois fashion – twice the arrest of Meins who was forced to submit to the united power of the state. All the paintings are dull, grey, often very vague, diffuse. Their presence is the horror of the almost-unbearable refusal to give an answer, to explain, to offer an opinion. I'm not so sure that the paintings question anything: they evoke conflicting reactions by their hopelessness and abandonment, their lack of choice. As long as I can remember I've been convinced that every rule, every viewpoint – in as much as they are ideologically motivated – is false, an obstacle, a threat or an infringement.'⁵ Richter searches for a way out of the ideological extremism of the nineteen-seventies but seems to stumble headlong into a wall of impotence. In this same period he writes: 'Art is paltry, cynical, obtuse. Hopeless, confused – a reflection of our own spiritual impoverishment, our barren and lost condition. We are bereft of grand ideas, utopias, we have lost any faith, anything that was capable of meaningfulness. Incapable of faith, we roam in total helplessness through a toxic dumping ground, perpetually in the greatest of danger: each of these incomprehensible fragments, these remnants of waste and refuse threatens us, pains and mutilates us and, sooner or later, unavoidably leads to our death. Worse than derangement.'⁶ Richter's words express a post-modern despair that can be compared to the quotes of Don DeLillo incorporated by Grimonprez into his film. The only remaining possibility for DeLillo's protagonist is finally to disappear from sight and stop making art. Richter doesn't disappear literally, but his refusal to take a standpoint has its visual pendant in the way in which the paintings are made: scant composition, no expression, no brushstroke, no colour or contour. As he often does, for this series Richter used existing images but in this case they are distinctly reminiscent of the drab photographs deployed by nineteen-seventies media to cast the urban guerrilla as the enemy. According to Richter, there's no escape: this grey image is the image we have to live with.

Richter's series is current once again thanks to its inclusion in the exhibition *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung*, which is currently on in Berlin. Because almost the entire exhibition focuses on the image of the RAF in the media, within this Richter's work suddenly acquires a generality that is undeserved. If we believe the critics, the exhibition's major flaw is the reproduction of media images; any standpoint on terror is meticulously avoided, creating the impression that the participating artists are jealous and slightly admiring of the members of the Baader-Meinhof, while demonizing the media.⁷ In such a context, the refusal to take a position becomes a platitude and the use of media images a facile way of pointing an accusing finger. The justifiable powerlessness Richter attests to seems, in the course of time, to have deteriorated in the hands of other artists to a fantasy of media omnipotence.

Grimonprez' piece also ultimately concentrates more on the media and less on the motives and, in this sense, the film is part of this development. But the maker goes about his work with resolute assiduity. He accepts the power of the media or the fatalism of DeLillo. You could say that the subject of Grimonprez' analysis is the way in which art is sidelined by the mutual attractions of terror and TV. By allowing the image to once more become an act, he surpasses the medium. Here, act can be taken to mean visible manipulation and montage with the aim of 'perforating' the screen that holds our gaze captive.

TV and terrorism

There is a curious connection between terror and spectacle. Death is not the sole objective of an assault; terrorists often consider visibility more important. And terror always opts for the most dominant medium of the day. Maximum theatricality coupled with maximum focus. Anarchists in the nineteenth century had a penchant for theatres, operas, parades and similar public festivals as platforms for their acts. The terror of the nineteen-sixties and seventies differed, exhibiting a decided affinity with film. Kidnappings and hi-jackings weren't just one of Hollywood's favourite themes, they even had a filmic structure – a clear plot, distinct protagonists and a well-aimed build-up from tension to a predictable climax. The locations (airports, embassies, innocent suburban homes) were carefully chosen and even the unavoidable end possessed a marked cinematographic force. However crude it might sound, the murder or suicide of Baader-Meinhof leaders in the Stammheim Prison has all the trappings of a fascinating thriller. This impression was far from coincidental, nor reconstructed after the event; members of groups like the Baader-Meinhof saw themselves with a filmic eye. The exhibition in Berlin includes a piece by Franz Ackermann who reproduces the group's plans James Bond-style, complete with a car that transforms into a helicopter to free the comrades from prison.⁸

The terror of our own day takes a gamble on another medium. No matter how much the images of the burning Twin Towers remind us of disaster movies, the visual language spoken is that of television. The sudden unpredictability of the attacks, the lack of logical development and the abrupt and chaotic end are all typical of the structural difference between TV and other media. In contrast to film, TV does not employ suspense – no progressive unfolding of plot – just the surprise, the abrupt and unexpected that disrupts the course of events. This factor is the reason why television always needs to be live everywhere because it's the only way to capture the surprise of the moment. The unanticipated, from soaps to America's Funniest Home videos and from reality programmes to the news is the essence of TV language. The medium takes enormous pains to maintain the double illusion of presence and unpredictability because this will keep us glued to the screen. Of course, this language is primarily rhetorical: the coincidence is often tightly directed, the surprise almost always skilfully stage-managed and the live recording often months old. All these elements make TV the ideal medium for the modern terrorist. Immediate, world wide attention catapults the attack to an unprecedented level of visibility. But for the terrorist, this demands enormous planning and stage direction; the attack has to be as sudden as it is surprising but, at the same time, should occur on camera. In that regard, the incidents of 11 September testify to phenomenal directing. The first aircraft succeeded in focusing attention on the buildings so that the impact of the second plane would be followed throughout the world.

Television and terrorism keep each other in balance. They share an interest in vigilance and presence. Terrorists can attack anywhere, compelling constant alertness everywhere, which in turn heightens terrorists' guarantee of visibility. This is how terror and its counter response provoke a world-embracing television gaze that maintains a constant watchful eye on its environs. We, the viewers, have an ever more pressing need for the screen: it is our eyes and ears and safeguards us from setting foot in places where terror could strike. This powerlessness and dependency feeds the fantasy of all-powerful media. The attack on our consciousness mainly derives its effect from the all-powerful fantasy that media and terror unite to uphold.

Art and terror

Jealousy is seldom mutual. Terrorists feel no envy for artists. But there does seem to be a link between art and terror, a link that extends further than jealousy born of impotence. The murder of Theo van Gogh is not the only example of an artist inspiring hatred in a terrorist. It is curious because, in terms of efficacy, the action of the artist pales beside the concrete feat of the terrorist. Art has no explicit objective, and this is another aspect in which it differs entirely from the dogged determination of terror. Its actions and products symbolize nothing more than a refined notion of freedom and seem powerless and unhazardous by comparison. But maybe art's

very tentative, random and superfluous nature is a stain on the sealed world the terrorist is aiming at, and which he attempts to achieve in tandem with the media.

Art can be seen as acting against one's better judgement and in that sense can possess a symbolic power that far transcends a one-sided symbolic function. Symbols are the favourite vehicles of dictators and multinationals and have long traded eloquence for familiarity through the misuse of slogans and logos. A call to artists to make appealing symbols is thus also an urge to simplification. Many artists tend rather to present the complexity of the world and, counter to the clustering of a concept into a single sign, which is what a symbol literally is, they depict the splintering of a concept in the form of an allegory that deploys the chunks of the fragmented world. This applies to the work that the artist makes, the image he produces. What the artist does on the other hand can, as the example of action, possess a symbolic charge because he is unconcerned with wishes and opportunities and doesn't gamble on the mass media. This exemplary function in all its randomness and meaninglessness is the essence of the currently accepted concept of performativity. In fact it means little more than that the artist shows that something can be made or done in what seems to be a hopeless, dead-end situation. This not only involves socially interactive projects where the locus of the action is literally the streets. Richter's series on the Baader-Meinhof group, painted when he doubted the point of art, can also be seen in this light. It is also the substance of Grimonprez' film when he presents and combats the omnipotence of the media. While the attack on consciousness paralyzes, art as action can spark consciousness into life. The terrorist's action has no clear goal, has far-reaching effects but cannot bring about anything new. Nor is that the intention: all terror groups in history are driven to destroy the existing situation and, only when that has been fully accomplished, do they see any possibility for a new order to arise. This action must not only destroy; the symbolic edge is at least of equal importance. The destruction must be complete – martyrdom is a condition but, at the same time, the attack must be an image that renders every other image unworkable. For the terrorist, the suicide attack is the ultimate act, for the media, the record of this act is the last image. The artist, however, behaves as though his act will be followed by many others. And to the same degree to which the attack becomes symbolic through the deadly embrace of the media that holds terror captive, the symbolic action of the artist is concrete: he produces something that is more than pure image.

An attack on consciousness is something an artist cannot achieve. It necessitates immediate, world wide visibility. But the artist can do something that pays scant heed to power, media and terror. And perhaps, just perhaps, elicit envy in the terrorist because of it.

Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung
KW Institute for Contemporary Art and St. Johannes-Evangelis-kirche, Berlin
30 January through 16 May

Gerhard Richter
K20, Kunstsammlung am Grabbplatz, Düsseldorf
12 February through 16 May

Notes

1. Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, New York 1991, p. 67.
2. For an exploration of this grey area, see also: Jeroen Boomgaard, 'De utopie van de argeloosheid: een korte cursus engagement', in *De Witte Raaf* no. 77 (January-February 1999), pp 23-25; Jeroen Boomgaard, 'Martelaarschap als methode; kunst en terreur versus bestel en staat', in *Representatie. Kunsthistorische bijdragen over vorst, staatsmacht en kunst*, eds. Johann-Christian Klamt and Kees Veelenturf, Nijmegen 2004, pp. 67-84.
3. *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 September 2001.
4. See *The Guardian* 11 September 2002 and 19 September 2002.

5. 'Notizen November 1988 (für die Pressekonferenz februar 1989 – Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld)', in Hans-Ulrich Obrist (red.), Gerhard Richter: Text. Schriften und Interviews, Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig, 1993, pp. 165-166.
6. Ibid., p. 162.
7. Hanno Rauterberg, 'In Geiselhaft', Die Zeit Nr. 5, 27 January 2005, p. 37-38
8. Ibid., Die Zeit, p. 37.

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