REVISITING THE IMPERIAL IMAGINARY : NOTES ON POST 9/11 AMERICAN MEDIA

J. David Slocum[1]

Abstract: The Islamic Middle East has emerged, at least since the fist World Trade Center bombing of 1993, as the site of foremost post-Cold War antagonism with, and threat to, the West. Yet that positioning in state policy and the popular imaginary has deep roots. This paper hopes to show, that antagonism is most forcefully grounded in discourses of terrorism. The emphasis here will be on what might be term the "imperial aesthetics" that have shaped political and media constructions of the Middle East.

Key words: World Trade Centre, terrorism, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

Before turning to the emphasis on the imperial aesthetics that have shaped the political and media constructions of the Middle East, there are five other areas of critical concern intersecting and informing of what is termed as the aesthetic:

A. American political demonology

The late Rogin (1993:508) identified a set of deep historical, indeed mythical, roots that have converged and persist in recent American politics. They include "the historical organization of American politics around racial domination"; "redemption trough violence, intensified in the mass technologies of entertainment and war"; "the belief in individual agency, the need to forget ... the web of social ties that enmesh us all"; and, "identification with the

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[1]. **J. David Slocum, BA, MA, PhD,** is a lecturer and Associate Dean of Academic and Student Life in New York University, U.S.A.
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E. The transformation of terrorism in the 1960s-70s

The late 1960s and early 70s marked a major transition in the framing of the [U.S. and Western] media's treatment of political violence. As Zulaika and Douglass (1996:46) argue, "events that previously were covered under the rubrics of assassination, bombing, torture, repression, massacre, etc., were [by 1972] classified as 'terrorism'"[3]. Likewise, the character of many of these actions shifted from being rural, separatist, and internal to being urban and transnational or as proxies for those of nations or blocs of nations. During these years, a series of events catalyzed negative impressions of the region, and its people: the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Israel was victorious, Arab nations were the aggressors); the1968 hijacking of an El Al flight by the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), widely covered on television and arguably a watershed in the mediation of terrorist action; the assault, broadcast globally, of the 1972 Munich Olympics by the Palestinian Black September group; the 1973 oil embargo driven by the Arab-led Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC); and the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and a number of Arab countries. The period was thus rife with characterizations of the region and religion that bred uncertainty at best and, as has been featured more directly since the Tehran hostage-taking (to be clear, by *Persian* Muslims) in 1979, danger at worst. Such negative perceptions have been extended in the years since by ongoing conflicts between the nation of Israel and stateless Palestinians, as well as the emergence of fundamentalist militant Islamic group.

IMPERIAL AESTHETICS

My principal focus here, to reiterate, concerns of the "imperial aesthetics" that transform violent events into terrorism and shape ways of seeing the Middle East. Indeed, if contemporary American politics of difference have inscribed post-Cold War public and media constructions of the Middle East region and of Arab Muslims as anxiety-fraught and dangerous, conventional aesthetics forms and practices have symbiotically refined and naturalized those constructions. The proliferation of media technologies since the 1970s has both collapsed older constraints of time and space by providing instantaneous coverage of distant events, especially wars and conflicts, and enabled the dissemination of images around the globe. Visual forms have

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[3].   See also, Sterling, *The Terror Network*, p.171.

become the overwhelming basis for communicating faraway or second-hand experiences. The resulting glut of visual information, particularly since the emergence of the Internet and satellite television, has exacerbated an environment in which the very practices of mediation are left mostly unexamined in public discourse except for occasional superficial discussions of the quality of coverage, spin, corporation, ownership, or ideological orientation. Yet in reference to today's presentation of terrorist events and actors, the explication of narrative, realism, and spectacle can shed important light on the media transformation of violent actions associated with the region into terrorism.

A ready example is the longstanding Hollywood convention, shared ᴏy many news organizations, that characteristically encourage[s] explanations of social realities in individual and psychological terms, rather than economic and political ones. As Hill (1997:132) and Jameson (1992) have argued, a result is the presentation of political narratives as thriller that "gravitate towards conspiracy theory." Closer appraisal of political films, especially thrillers, highlights practices of surveillance and the technologies pursuit of cinematic narrative itself: just as journalist and other media producers probe the causes and motivations of events, film visualize the investigative function of narrative. By revealing meaning, the operation of the camera and the flow of the narrative constitute a trope of illumination fundamental to the public rendering of terrorism. Part of the pleasure provided by these films to viewers is consequently the clarification of otherwise uncertain details that, in the calculus of terrorism, then warrant decisive responses[4]. The ties

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[4]   The trope of illumination sometimes enables the ironic or even parodic treatment of the commonplace suggestion of media manipulation by terrorist. In True Lies, as the terrorist attempt to videotape a threatening message to be sent for global broadcast, the batteries in the hand-held camera fail. The scene, which overtly affords the principal terrorist n opportunity to declaim the hateful (if utterly simplistic and stereotypical) anti-Western politics motivating his actions, also comically derides the Arab camera operator as incompetent. In the process, however, the troubling complicity of images in the terrorist enterprise is made clear even as it is thwarted. T he scene might be approached as a filmic fantasy of inversion: while the director James Cameron's film camera surveils the planning and preparation for terrorist violence — actions to which we are typically denied access in the actual world — the operation in the fictional world of the video technology that would ordinarily provide our only glimpse of terroristic threats and rationales is disrupted.

between military or covert "ways of seeing" and those practiced by journalistic and entertainment media move beyond the justification of one by the other: increasingly, both realms have come to share aesthetic and epistemological practices that are mobilized through technology to support overlapping political and economic activities.

Spectators partake in the visual pleasures and traumas afforded by these image-based narratives in large part according to the practices and precept of realism. Functioning as a powerful discourse of objectivity and authenticity, Kaplan (1995: 62-63) has written that realist texts "establish 'a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text ... defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth.' Not regarded as material, the metalanguage is then seen as transparent 'window on the world.' In these texts, the narrative discourse is seen as 'allowing reality to appear,' and 'denies its own status as articulation,'" Put differently, many media texts and practices are predicated upon implicit claims of truth and transparency; these claims are bound up not so much in the object matter being represented (though that, too, contributes to the larger effect) but in the mediated depiction of objects and events as empirically true. Viewers are called upon to accept the apparently objective, balanced treatment of historical events enabled by these forms but also *not* to question the truth claims of the media images — or more generally to reflect on the complicity of cinema (and, as viewers, their own complicity) in according specific meanings to political conflicts in the world.

To problematize claims of truth, to test the limitations of given media forms, and to focus on the processes of articulation being denied or made to seem natural are important critical tasks. Such analysis reveals that, trough their very structures and operation, and notwithstanding the particular subject matter being presented, media forms and practices advance and accord legitimacy to certain viewing positions, ideological principles, and political and economic relations, in fact, for our current discussion, Allen Feldman's resonant phrase, "colonial visual realism" seems fitting[5].

THE IDEA OF SPECTACLE

Importantly related to this discussion of narrative and realism is the idea of spectacle. The subject of varied and often dense theorization, it may be helpful to remark that spectacle is *not* simply what appears in a single frame, *not* merely a given arresting image, and *not* only the straightforward

result of special effects or technological manipulation. It is, moreover, not essentially an instance of incoherent or excessive meaning that disrupts the reading of narrative texts as homogenous and coherent. Instead, spectacle can be understood as another basic for visual meaning that reinforces and operates with traditional narrative practices[6]. Spectacle, in fact, refers here to a mode of production of images that marks the shift from direct experience to mediated experience and a transformation of the social relations of the spectator. In its seminal formulation by Debord (1995:26), spectacle "is at once here and elsewhere," and turns on the relation of the spectator here t image there – a one-way relation that defines the individual's identity through his position as a spectator and fixes the status of the image as "commodity ruling over all lived experience." This separation of individuals from the world they view, and from each other, breeds what Webers (2002:454) claims is "an ambivalence that results when anxieties related to the limitations of physical (and social) existence, involving frailty, vulnerability, and ultimately mortality, are provisionally suppressed through images that position the spectator as invulnerable and all-seeing survivor. Media spectacle, *as process*, produces a perpetual stream of images of catastrophe, conflict, and disunity, while at the same time offering to the spectator the promise of unity of experience and comprehension.

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[5]   Among our responsibility as critics, of course, is to remain mindful of these forms and practices Speaking broadly to regimes of social and narrative control grounded in images, Feldman notes that: "stories [of realist images] are doubled-edged: they attest to the dominance of the visual paradigms in the prosecution of political warfare and in its culture of representation, and yet at the same time, in their very telling, they register the limits of vision as vehicles for claiming truth." Not only is the i llumination of terrorism through narrative constructed and uncertain, the seeming revelations of truth offered through the visual representations of actors and events are intrinsically limited. Image-based narratives and accounts of events in the world consequently prove as potentially unstable, incoherent, and susceptible to conceptual fragmentation as the identity categories and political regimes they appear to visualize. See Allen Feldman, "Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror," *Public Culture* 10.1 (1997): 57.

[6]   See Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

The paradox, even contradiction, driving this process is that the anxiety over images of discord and disunity can only be allayed, and the spectator's illusion of restored unity and stability maintained, through the ongoing production and consumption of further images of destruction. This operation of spectacle entails logic of "hiding in plain sight" or what Rogin (1993:507), speaking of the effective display, then forgetting of, specific images in public and especially historical discourse, called "amnesiac representation." The collapse of critical distance and creation of passive viewers, political subjects, and consumers involves the loss of awareness of the formal practices of the media, its roles as producer of meaning, and of the individual's own involvement in the process of making meaning. In place of the know ledges accrued through such awareness, spectacles operates amidst familiar forms of mediation and the circumscribed discursive constructions supporting them – all while continually re-articulating and reinforcing culturally recuperative values and belief-systems in accord with the imperatives of the national security state.

Yet even more, the shifting of attention from production to consumption privatizes "imperial spectacle" by making its engagement a regular leisure activity. The everyday experience of viewers in this way becomes intertwined with public and political displays. Mass media themselves become implicated by deploying familiar narrative and visual forms that enable spectacle to be continuously consumed and, at once, to repetitively re-formulated the intertwining of the everyday and political. What we might observe in this privatizes, everyday consumption is the replacement of the real with the effect of unacknowledged simulations of the real[7]. Approaching spectacle as a social process (rather than single event or image) entails recognizing the centrality of technological mediations to our engagement with the contemporary world, that is, specifically, with distant terrorism and domestic life alike. Just as the actors responsible for violent events around the world are transformed through politically self-justifying mediations into terrorist, in other words, the same political and aesthetic practices of media colonize domestic citizens and "turn them into imperial subjects"[x].

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[7]   See Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essay on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002); and, Jean Baudrillard, "L'Esprit du Terrorisme," South Atlantic Quaeterly 101.3.

MUSLIM SOCIETY

Let us turn to some specific illustrations of these theoretical concerns in U.S. and Western ways of mediating the Middle East. Media views of Muslim society entail a privileging of distant events in a visibly masculine public realm where women and private spaces are elided. Left unexamined by most media coverage are the culturally specific distinctions between private and public in Muslim societies that resist incursion into the private or domestic spaces of women – and contribute to the sharp juxtaposition between American and Middle Eastern social life. The lack of access to the private spaces of Muslim societies and, specifically, to women frustrates attempts to reconcile understandings of masculine and feminine relations or public and private realms in these societies. Instead, the invisibility or, in Muslim societies, partial visibility behind the veil of women reinforces constructions of these societies as metaphorically gendered. Ike the experience of conquest of the "virgin land" of the America frontier, efforts to penetrate and possess territories and peoples

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ˣ   See Michael Rogin, "Make My Day!,"p.507. Close analysis of media and spectacle thus raise the specter of a twinning of terrorist and citizen, of trans-national and national actors. Terrorism, as John Gray has argued, has from the late nineteenth-century been co-emergent with the political and economic formations it has typically assailed. Radical Islam today is consequently "a symptom of the disease of which it pretends to be the cure." [John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern* (New York: The New Press, 2003), p.26.] Rather than being simply irrational or medieval or hateful, as it is often superficially cast, terrorism, upon closer review, appears as a complicated inversion of the values at the roots of legitimate Western society. The result of this intricately related opposition of values is the establishment of the terrorist as a doppelganger of the citizen (as, variously, holder on rights, consumer, soldier, tourist, believer). [Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist," *UCLA Law Review* 49, 5 (June 2002):1575-1600; rpt. In Mary L. Dudziak, ed., *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 147-62.] Mass-produced and -consumed media such as cinema, television, photography, and even the Internet have only magnified and complicated the relationship. The power of these media to give meaning to terrorist activities and to refract the values and motivations inscribing them is itself a seminal mark of modern life's replacement of real with representational experience, of the global pervasiveness of media images, and of the indirect, depersonalized, and distant relations defining the political and economic order.

assert the masculinity of colonizers – while the colonized, from Africa and Arabia to India, are cast as exotic, mysterious, and feminine. Even contemporary and ostensibly postcolonial acts of rescue and liberation, as in the case of women oppressed by the Taliban regime in Afganistan, are couched in the gendered terms of the captivity narrative. When critical accounts of the (post)colonial woman position her as a "'victim' of Muslim orthodoxy (and, to a lesser extent, colonialism) ... [and] as revolutionary 'agent' of decolonization"(Decker 1990:181) they can thus be read as speaking to the wider dynamics of the colonial (and anti-colonial) project. Entire peoples, like individual women remain both vulnerable and potent *and* retain the nearly paradoxical status of being both marginalized within the prevailing international order and nevertheless central to it.

If vulnerability is a common characteristic of women in terrorist narratives, especially as those women who appear to symbolize broader social values, it co-exist with the special threat of women perpetrating acts of violence (Neuberger and Valentini 1996). The apparent repudiation (in the commission of these acts by women) of the "civilized" values of which they are meant to be repositories marks them as doubly threatening. News coverage in 2002 of Waffa al-Edress, the first female Palestinian suicide bomber against Israel, conveyed a fascination with, and dread about, the prospect of women coming to believe that violence is an appropriate form of political action. Violent acts by women can also, as in the case of revolutionary or anti-colonial relations, emphasize how fervent are beliefs in active resistance to powers of oppression or occupation. For our current discussion of mediations of these acts, moreover, the depiction of women as both victims and violent speaks to broader questions of how to visualize non-military political struggles, including anti-colonial ones. Fanon used the Muslim woman's veil, and the character of the woman behind the veil, to explicate the ways in which the Western imaginary constructed colonial lands and peoples as non-white and feminine – and thus as powerless. Media productions tend to capture and extend this construction bi illustrating the conflicted characterization of women as terrorists and by visualizing their centrally to media representations of colonial and other distant political struggles".

Of course, the trope of transparent illumination works both ways. The investigative of the camera can be mobilized to present multiple political

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9   See Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," *In A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967); and, Decker, "Terrorism (Un) Veiled."

perspectives on the world or specific situations. In fact, it is telling to suggest more broadly that the operations of the imperial state and media parallels the convergence of the artistic and political articulated by "Third Cinema" filmmakers who, in the 1960s and '70s, conceived of the "the camera as [their] rifle" in wider campaigns to subvert dominant culture, to liberate colonized nations, and to foment revolution (Solanas and Getino 1997:49). Today, the power of cinematic technology to convey alternative ways of seeing and making sense of experience is mostly muted in U.S. mass corporate entertainment and news media. The capability persists, however, and with it, media technology's potential to unsettle viewers.

MASS MEDIA AND TERRORISM

More familiarly, patterns underlying the political thriller and related films about social problems, national instability, and global events beg further questions about aesthetics and politics. We might claim that many mediations of terrorism, at least the predominantly visual, partake of a process of "recentering" and resumption of control.[10] This resonates with the disjuncture between the putative coherence of a unitary nation and the shifting, often conflicting sectors of that "national" society. It also points to a range of psychological, social, political, and historical frameworks by which individuals and groups consistently see the world and understand it. That Western spectators view the Middle East region and its denizens from a distance from which they both have their anxieties confirmed and remain safe is crucial to the psychological and social operation of global mass media. Given histories, moreover, not only explain past events but privilege aspects of present experience: the construction official or prevailing accounts of the past consequently entails sanctioning certain memories of traumatic events and invoking certain beliefs in state and nation, such as *remembering* the unitary nation even seemingly in the face of fragmentation and shifting notions of difference.[11] Narratives of violent actions can, in part dependent upon

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[10]   Maurice Berger has argued that photographs of the consequences of violent actions characterized as terroristic have a "trauma effect [which] ultimately resides in the image's temporal disposition and the concomitant frustration of the viewer's sense of control," and" robs people of their sense of center." Maurice Berger, "Visual Terrorism," in *Violent Persuasions: The Politics and Imagery of Terrorism,* ed. David J. Brown and Robert Merrill (Seattle: Bay Press, 1993), pp. 22, 24.

whether that actions are interpreted as terrorism or racism or colonialism, *re*-center or *de*-center viewers' political and moral understandings of both the past and the contemporary world.[12] Like the broader conception of spectacle as a social process that positions viewers for everyday consumption, such a mediation of the past has the power to position viewers as citizens of a present rooted in particular understandings of the past (Stam 2003:133-149). The historical positioning of the viewers, that is, operates to make (and, as more time passes, to *un-make* or *re-make*) histories and memories that enable sense to be made of present. Mediations of varied actors and events have, for more than a century, been central to the process of making and remaking understandings of terrorism as a contemporary threat.

CONCLUSION

I would contend that mediations of events labeled as terrorism have since the late nineteenth century revealed thoroughgoing cultural anxieties over the ambiguities and fragmentation of nations and international relations, the centrality of gender and imperial relations to this national project, and the persistent uneasiness resulting for individual identity construction. Understandings of thee mostly distant events are structured by the forms and practices of technological media and their consumption. At the same time, anxieties over those very forms of mediation and representation, that is, over the instability and fragmentation of realism as a perceptual register and basis of truth claims and the wholesale replacement of individuals' direct experience with the mediated, exacerbates uncertainties over technological development, rationalized social order, structured otherness, and imperial politics. Of particular concern, recent decades has been the mergence of a spectacular "structure of motivated disavowal" in which the demonization of given actors as terrorists and the justification of forceful "responses" by counter-terrorist forces give pleasure to the viewer only then to be effectively

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[11]   Illustrative are the struggles in German historical and public discourse to understand the role of memory in the terrorism of the 1970s. See, Olaf Hoerschelmann, " 'Memoria Dextera Est': Film and Public Memory in Postwar Germany," *Cinema Journal,* Vol. 40, No. 2, (2001): 78-97.

[12]   See also, David Apter, : Political Violence in Analytical Perspective," in *The Legitimization of Violence,* ed. Apter (New York: New York University Press, 1997),pp. 1-31; and, Clair Wills, "Language Politics, Narrative, and Political Violence," *Oxford Literary Review,* Vol. 13, No.1-2, (1991): 20-60.

forgotten – until the next time they are presented without meaningful historical context or content (Rogin 1993:506). The mutually reinforcing linkages between the politics and mediations of terrorism in this way feed the desire for coherent, stable, and reassuring frames for understanding international relations and the nation itself. The transformation of violent events into terrorism has thus been seen as a kind of ideological safety net for the self-perpetuating operations of dominant political and media agents ass well as the consistent positioning of viewers as political subjects and consumers.

While these patterns and linkage have long been in play, their influence has become especially salient in the 1990s and since September 11, 2001. And their grounding in the Middle East has become especially pronounced. We might, in fact, re-articulate Said's formulation about Western perception of Islam in order to make sense of efforts to view September 11 as a crucible for deciding the future of American political, social, and economic policies. For the right, the attacks on that day were a clarion call to return to the triumphal clarity of the greatest generation, of the Cold War, and of the Reaganite '80s; for the left, the tragedy called forth a return to '60s countercultural and '90s anti-globalization solidarity; for the center, the event cast light on the uncertain status of civilizations, nation-states, and individuals in a post-Cold War world. In all camps, however, the emergent dominant discourse catalyzed a range of existing anxieties and marginalized competing constructions in order to privilege a certain vision of cultural or geopolitical insecurity centered in the Middle East and its defining tendency for terrorism[13].

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[13]   A noteworthy subtext appears when raising the issue of September 11, 2001 as turning point. Before that day's events, the United States shared with Europe the year 1989, and the fall of communism, as an historical marker like 1918 or 1945 for defining the current age. By continuing to insist on September 11 as watershed, Americans have adopted 2001 as a separate point of transition — and, in the process, reinscribed once again the nation's exceptionalism.

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