

# The Aesthetics of Terror

Roe Rosen, 2004

## 1. Discussing Art and Terror

9/11, the Abu-Ghraib photos and the videos made by Bin Laden and left by *Shahids* before their suicide attacks spurred several calls for the consideration of these iconic media events in relation to artistic representation. For example, Boris Groys (who states in his essay *The Terrorist Subject* that “we” know Bin Laden as a video artist), moderated a workshop in Jerusalem on these topics at the same time that the ICP in New York held an exhibition of the Abu-Ghraib photos (curated by Brian Wallis). Most of the discussions so far, however, made little attempt to offer a real formal analysis of the aesthetics of terror. Such an analysis, I believe, should recognize not only the representations of acts of violence perpetrated by underground organizations, but also the imagery related to acts of terror fostered by Nation States.

Feigning a formal approach in such a context might seem preposterous. Yet the import of aesthetics as I suggest it here has nothing to do with notions of representational autonomy or sensorial delectation. I wish to claim in what follows that substantial distinctions between state and clandestine images of terror can be articulated in terms of aesthetics, and can thus shed light on the mechanisms that perpetrate them.

## 2. Underground Terror and State Terror

The dumbfounding power of the 9/11 images, and the audio-cinematic drama of a new tape by Bin Laden or a suicide bomber video, brought most theoretical texts so far to focus on their characteristics as media events, and neglect the question of the

difference between these images and imagery of State terrorism (comments have been made, for instance, on the appropriation of the Twins disaster for the Bush election campaign, but not on the distinction in representational means between images forged by Israeli Prime minister Sharon or Bush and those of Bin Laden).

Before I address this distinction I reckon that the very definition of State-produce imagery of terror might be confusing, not only as most people think of terrorism as exclusively clandestine, but also because a distinction needs to be asserted between images connoting State terror within the broader field of representations of State-induced violence, war documentation and so on. While offering no water-tight definition I still perceive as distinctly terrorist those images (and acts) intended to inspire fear, to literally terrorize, as a principle and conspicuous motive (often characterized by the fact that when violence is committed it makes no pretence for its benefit on military grounds, and its victims - and sometimes, in the case of an iconic image, its addressees - are civilians).

*It seems to me that the principle gap between representations of underground terrorism (produced by the terrorists) and those of State terrorists is the gap between figuration and abstraction.* The representational apparatus of underground terrorism strives for a central, powerful figure (Collapsing skyscrapers, or an icon in the religious sense: a super-human, semi-divine person whose very appearance defies the divide of life and death; the images suicide bombers produce before their death are the clearest example here). Interestingly, this goes against the flat and reductive division that would have Muslim ideologues as patently iconoclastic.

Representations of State Terror, on the contrary, are based on the obfuscation or

erasure of central figures and their exchange for abstraction: aerial views of bombardments, for example, or the blocking of visibility by grids — such as the grid of Israel's separation wall (the so-called 'security fence'). Abstraction and purity here are meant to connote reason, order, control and cleanliness.

In terms of the economy of image production, there is a paradoxical reversal at play: the powerful and technologically advanced visual means of the State are employed to minimize visibility. And if the State produces images of abstracted terror, than the prototype here is the image of the Atomic mushroom, akin, in terms of abstract painting, to *the stain*.

### **3. Abu Ghraib and Saddam's Mouth**

In the exceptional cases wherein the State willfully produces an iconic image of its terrorizing power, its offensive aim is attained by declaring an opposite meaning: humiliation as aid, dehumanization as medical treatment and so on. An emblematic example here is the image of Saddam Hussein after his capture, gloved hands opening his mouth and flooding it with glowing bluish light. The declarative meaning of the image is an urgently needed dental checkup for an unkempt man. But the operation of the image is the public display of what should have remained hidden but for the Abu Ghraib photos: a ritual of humiliation of a distinctly sexual and sadistic nature, employing common conventions of pornography to emasculate the (phallic) man, the enemy leader. These are the conventions: Saddam is a passive, subjugated body upon which an invisible subject coerces an entry (to the mouth); the mouth, gaping to the limit so as to accommodate the insertion is reenacting the patriarchal paradigm associating the gaping feminine cavity with speechlessness (the protagonist in *Deep Throat* who cannot speak by the very fact that her mouth is

busy; that basic distinction of male and female in porn that Angela Carter described as the difference between “!” and “O”); the delineation of the cleft by compositional trimming (the crotch-shot), and its highlighting by special effects (here, blue light).

It is easy to recognize the affinities of this image with some of the Abu Ghraib photos, wherein two male prisoners are coerced to perform oral acts, or denigration is attained by juxtaposing a smiling, fully clad female soldier with a leashed, dog-like prisoner (even though the pornographic precedents here are of a different, harsher order). The framing narrative allowing Saddam’s image to operate (aid served to a POW, a medical procedure, purification), necessitates, it should be reminded, a supplementary image: that of Saddam with a decent haircut, his mustache trimmed back to its original style, and “properly” dressed (the *before* and *after* device), but the latter image is purely instrumental (thus, a “boring” image), and will not be returned to after its presentation.

#### **4. Will and Web**

The struggle over the dissemination and control of terror imagery can largely be described as a battle of strong wills. Underground terrorism is served by the rarity and uniqueness of its products to make them precious for the media; State terrorism relies on its overwhelming production and distribution capacity. Ordaining truth-value to an already-existing image (for example, the incorporation of images of terrorist attacks into right-wing election campaigns) can still be accounted for within a traditional discourse divining empirical truth-value from ideological truth-value as attempts to will the image’s meaning (the thing we saw as opposed to that thing’s ‘real’ meaning). The tangibility of the Abu Ghraib photos on the web introduces to this discourse the unwilling net. The point here is not the sudden visibility of images

that are damaging for a reigning power—there is nothing substantially new about that—but in the ubiquity of the web as an uncontrolled conduit of images. Elsewhere I have written that regarding pornography, the web had shattered an absolute principle binding the degree of a product’s perversity with its tangibility and its price tag (the more perverse the product, the harder it will be to purchase, and steeper the price, up to the criminal product whose price entails punitive measures). It will be fallacious to project utopist yearnings unto the unwilling horizontality of the web, but clearly it shuffles the cards for the mapping of reality in terms of strong wills and the law. This is why when the law asserts itself on the web (as in the fight against file-sharing, for instance), there is an odd but pertinent feeling that the law is illicit.

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