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Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism

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Abstract   *As terrorist actions, both state and non-state, have spread in both frequency and destructive power since the 1960s, the topic has become an enduring source of narratives, fantasies, and myths that have contributed to Hollywood filmmaking with its familiar emphasis on international intrigue, exotic settings, graphic violence, and the demonization of foreign threats. Images of political violence have a strong appeal in the US, where the gun culture, civic violence, crime sprees, and a thriving war economy permeate the landscape. The al Qaeda attacks of 9/11 heightened public fascination with terrorism, fueled by mounting fear and paranoia, and this was destined to inspire a new cycle of films in which on-screen terrorism dramatizes elements of real-life threats that now include possible weapons of mass destruction. The "war on terror," driven as much by US strategy to reconfigure the Middle East as by the events of 9/11, serves as the perfect backdrop for film industry productions of violent high-tech spectacles, now a major staple of media culture. For cinema as for politics, the "Middle East" now exists as a mystical category largely outside of time and space, a ready source of dark fears and threats. At the same time, corporate-driven globalization, viewed as a cultural as well as economic and political process, feeds into modern terrorism as political violence (including militarism) sharpens its capacity to attack, disrupt, and surprise—the same features now so integral to the Hollywood film industry. We see jihadic terrorism as not only a virulent form of blowback against US imperial power but as possibly the darkest side of neo-liberal globalization.*

Many years before the events of 9/11, terrorism was already a central focus of Hollywood filmmaking, one reflection within popular culture of the increasing levels of political violence in American society, in US foreign policy, and across the globe. Terrorist actions, both state and non-state, have spread in both numbers and destructive power since the 1960s, spanning such diverse regions as North America, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. Terrorism has become a vital source of narratives, fantasies, and myths that contribute so much to highly entertaining cinema, with its international intrigue, exotic settings, graphic violence, and the putative conflict between good and evil. Scenes of terrorist and counterterrorist activity have a natural cinematic appeal, above all in the US where the gun culture, civic violence, crime sprees, and a flourishing war economy permeate the landscape. The al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon inevitably heightened public fascination with terrorism, fueled by mounting fear and paranoia, and this was destined to inspire a new cycle of films in which powerful images of on-screen terrorism dramatize elements of real-life terrorism that nowadays conjures the threat of weapons of mass destruction.

The rise of jihadic terrorism mostly associated with the Middle East, with its dispersed networks, sinister leaders and operatives, and global reach, occurs as a reaction against US geopolitical hegemony. And President Bush's "war on terror," surely driven as much by the US strategy to reconfigure the Middle East as by the events of 9/11, serves as the perfect backdrop for film industry productions of violent high-tech spectacles, now a major staple of a media culture.

From Politics to Cinema

Within a New World Order shaped by US economic and military power, both terrorism and the *war* on terrorism appear to have few limits in time and space given how immersed these phenomena are in the global dialectic of militarism and terrorism. Antagonism to US domination takes many forms, but political violence is endemic to a neo-liberal global order enforced by the largest war machine ever. One outcome of specifically jihadic terrorism, however, is to strengthen this dialectic, as the post-9/11 situation amply shows, favoring a milieu in which an aggressive neocon foreign policy could gain wide political currency during the Bush ascendancy. Militant anti-US sentiment in the Arab/Muslim world has spread as one manifestation of blowback against growing US militarism. Against this reality, media culture upholds a simplistic "madman" thesis of global terrorism, obsessed with small pockets of evildoers—larger-than-life villains like Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Slobodan Milosevic—prepared to destroy Western values. The main political and media discourses stress an epic struggle between (Western, democratic, modern) "civilization" and (Jihadic, Muslim, primitive) "barbar-ism"—a self-serving, hypocritical grand narrative that frames political violence as a monopoly of cultural/national Others whose modus operandi, mostly local attacks, contrasts with the "legitimate" military actions of powerful governments launching high-tech missile strikes and bombing raids. The post-9/11 shift occurs at a time when American political culture has grown more insular and provincial, in part owing to the stifling impact of the corporate media.

For cinema as for politics the "Middle East" now exists as a quasi-mystical category largely outside of time and space, a ready source of dark fears and threats. Such ideological bias has shaped public understanding of the region (as well as terrorism) for many years in advance of 9/11, reflected in a new wave of Middle East-centered terrorist films beginning in the early 1980s. Patterns of terrorist activity were changing at this time, toward a new phase of global operations. As the *9/11 Commission Report* of 2004 states: "a new breed of Islamic terrorist has emerged from the downtrodden societies of the Middle East. Attached to no nation but infiltrating many, its strategy is to inflict mass casualties and their aim is to attack no less than the heart of Western civilization. The preeminent practitioner of modern terrorism is Osama bin Laden, and in the space of a decade he has managed to draw the United States into a declaration of global war: new tools of counterterrorism, more aggressive strategies and tactics—and an unprecedented focus on the threat of devastating violence in the American homeland."[1] Whatever the truth content of this statement, it does stand as the

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[1] *9/11 Commission Report* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 421.

overriding *perception* ruling elites have of the new terrorist challenge, while the "tools" and "focus" mentioned in the report increasingly extend to media culture.

Hollywood's fascination with terrorism—at least its *foreign* variant—actually goes back several decades, to the World War II era, if not earlier. One classic of this genre was Alfred Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942), featuring a worker-hero who stumbles into a clandestine terrorist cell of American Nazi fifth columnists planning to sabotage aircraft factories, hydroelectric dams, and naval warships. Hitchcock based his dramatic structure—the bombing of a US ship—on historical events surrounding the mysterious burning of the *U.S.S. Lafayette*, an ocean liner being refitted as a warship in 1942. The film contains a shot of the badly damaged *Lafayette* lying on its side at a Manhattan dock. Hitchcock turns to Charles Tobin (Otto Kruger), a wealthy businessman obsessed with gaining political power, to lead the saboteurs, who include a rich dowager (Alma Kruger) and several mid-level and lower-level operatives. Their stated purpose is to create "a more profitable type of government" in the US modeled on European fascism since, as Tobin proclaims, "the competence of totalitarian nations is much higher than our own. They get things done." And Tobin would love nothing better than to install himself as dictator: "Power, yes, I want it as much as you want your comfort or your job or that girl." In this wartime narrative filled with crude stereotypes, we see that Tobin would be ready to have thousands of people killed in order to satisfy his power obsession. The fascist monsters, taking every advantage of Constitutional freedoms, win a few victories but are summarily vanquished in the end. *Saboteur* reminds the audience of a familiar motif endemic to terrorism: evil can surface virtually anywhere, often in the most unexpected places. This narrative would reappear with a vengeance in Hitchcock's next film, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), and would become a staple in dozens of future pictures dealing with terrorism.

If the late 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of a cycle of Cold War and sci-fi movies influenced by the classic noir thriller—films like *Pickup on South Street* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)—the 1960s ushered in a new phase of terrorist-action films best exemplified by the early James Bond movies, fixating on shadowy terrorist groups out to subvert Western interests. Villains in such films as *Dr. No* (1962), *Goldfinger* (1964), *Thunderball* (1965), and *You Only Live Twice* (1967) were easily disposed of by the shrewd and wisecracking Bond, though he was often forced to rely on the resources of British intelligence. In contrast to fanatical ideologues later identified with Arab or Muslim terrorism, Bond's enemies were colder, more politically calculating figures working for the World Communist Conspiracy (like Dr. No). In Terrence Young's *Thunderball* we have a fiendish, swarthy terrorist (played by Adolpho Celi), who plans to detonate a stolen nuclear warhead unless he receives $280 million in ransom. Bond (Sean Connery) thwarts this plot thanks to clever tactics and cool demeanor under great duress. His deadpan humor, the film's non-stop action sequences, and sophisticated underwater special effects make *Thunderball* a first-rate spectacle even if the plot is not remotely believable. Compared to later terrorist episodes, Young's handling of nuclear blackmail seems almost incidental to the ongoing repartee between Bond and special agents on both sides. The notion that a terrorist could get hold of a nuclear device and use it for blackmail, however, something barely thinkable in 1965, would be considered quite feasible by the 1990s—in real life as in cinema. Where terrorism appeared as an exotic narrative device in the

1960s, within three decades far more cataclysmic scenarios would become prophetic and, by 9/11, the earlier fantasies had morphed into imaginable nightmares.

A New Breed of Villain

By the late 1980s, with the Cold War in its death throes, cinematic terrorism—following a hiatus of nearly two decades—moved onto new ground, turning to the Middle East where Arab/Muslim militants were locked in battle with Israel and, to a lesser extent at the time, the US. These groups replaced Communists and kindred time-honored demons as larger-than-life screen villains. Many such films, for example the *Delta Force* series (from 1986 to 1991), were made in Israel or with Israeli financing and/or backing. The terrorist enemy was seen as semi-civilized, violent, shady, beyond redemption, capable of horrendous crimes—traits making them suitable for extermination. Lee Marvin, cast in the first *Delta Force* movie, is quoted as saying: "I like what the picture says ... Audiences love to see the bad guy get it. We start blowing up everybody. That's good old American revenge."[2] In *Delta Force 3,* essentially a replay of the first episode, Palestinians are depicted as nuclear terrorists ready to blow up Miami, assisted by a crazed sheikh. Shouting "Allah Akbar", a terrorist attempts to detonate a nuclear bomb but is thwarted at the last moment. In Roman Polanski's *Frantic* (1988), starring Harrison Ford, several drunken Arab kidnappers set out to obtain stolen devices for triggering a nuclear explosion. Commenting on these and related films, Douglas Kellner observes that such racist caricatures of Arabs were hauntingly similar to earlier fascist and Nazi depictions of Jews in European popular culture during the 1920s and 1930s.[3]

One departure from Hollywood's Middle East obsession at this time was John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), the first in a series of terrorist-action films starring Bruce Willis as overworked New York policeman John McClane. In the premier, McClane travels to Los Angeles at Christmas time to visit his estranged wife and two daughters when he comes across a group of German terrorists led by Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman), who commandeer an office building and take hostage employees of the Nakatoni Corporation. The terrorists patiently wait while a computer expert unlocks a code that will make available some $600 million. McClane slips out of the party unnoticed and, armed with only a handgun, begins a counterattack that rapidly subdues the Germans. In these scenes the German villains evoke images of World War II Nazis, while McClane's one-man show of brute force sets new standards for ultra-masculine heroism typical of the modern action/adventure. McTiernan weaves together elements of terrorism and economic sabotage at a time when US corporations were facing ever-stiffening competition from Europe and Japan. Renny Harlin's *Die Hard 2* (1990) sought to capitalize on its precursor's box-office success, this time with McClane transferring to the Los Angeles Police Department after meeting his wife (Bonnie Bedelia) at Dulles Airport, where terrorists—working for a Latin American dictator resembling Manuel Noriega—brazenly seize control of the facilities,

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[2] Cited in Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), p. 158.

[3] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 86.

at which point McClane swings into action to crush the pathetic, one-dimensional villains.

Back to the Middle East, Lewis Teague's *Navy Seals* (1990) revolves around the theft by Arabs/Palestinians of US-made Stinger missiles just as an American helicopter crew is taken hostage. Seven SEALs, led by Charlie Sheen, come to the rescue: the crew is freed with Israelis and Americans working in tandem to slaughter dozens of Palestinians. The scruffy, sinister-looking Arabs are casually referred to as "scumbags," while Beirut is described as a "shithole" filled with "ragheads". Other stereotypical portraits quickly follow. In *American Ninja 4: The Annihilation* (1991), a nuclear-mad Islamic sheikh, setting out to bomb New York City with the full blessings of Allah, finally receives his punishment at the hands of Delta Force commandos. *Patriot Games* (1992) depicts terrorists as a motley assemblage of Palestinians, Libyans, and Syrians, all rapidly decimated video-game style—wooden victims whose terrorist camp in Libya is bombed by the US, anticipating the real Clinton-ordered aerial strikes in 1995. In a similar vein, *Chain of Command* (1993), the work of Israeli producer Yoram Globus, shows Arab terrorists taking Americans hostage in the fictitious Republic of Quimir, where the evildoers blow up a station only to be bloodily vanquished, with a single American operative mechanically killing dozens of Arabs. The fact that Palestinians have never been involved in *global* terrorism—their operations always being local, directed against Israel—seems not to have troubled the producers whose main concern is to bring ultra-patriotic narratives and images, tied to the "clash of civilization" motif, to the big screen.

In James Cameron's critically acclaimed *True Lies* (1994), we have an Arnold Schwarzenegger action vehicle tapping into the cultural pillars of Empire through a rare mixture of Hollywood genres: combat, gangster, Western, thriller, romantic comedy, and counterterrorist action film in the Bond tradition. Schwarzenegger plays undercover agent Harry Tasker working with sidekick Gib (Tom Arnold) to track a ruthless Arab terrorist (Art Malik) who has taken hold of several nuclear warheads. Tasker surfaces from a frozen Swiss lake and crashes an elegant party thrown by an Arab tycoon for his fellow terrorist plotters. By hacking into computer data at the mansion Tasker is able to follow the criminal plans of the group Crimson Jihad. In familiar Bond style he disposes of all those standing in the way of his mission, including a small militia of well-armed security cops. The narrative informs us that Western global interests are threatened by Crimson Jihad, whose agents are happily prepared to use weapons of mass destruction. As the film unfolds Cameron interrupts the global intrigue, however, to introduce a complicated sexual subplot in which Tasker suspects his wife Helen (Jamie Lee Curtis) of having an affair during his extended absences. The husband's suspicions are born out by a private investigator, although eventually husband and wife manage to patch things up—but not before Helen, thinking her husband was just a computer salesman, learns of his true occupation, at which juncture the movie becomes more farce than action-thriller. When Helen asks her husband if he was ever forced to kill anyone, he responds "yeah, but they were all bad." Tasker and his wife link up as a counterterrorist team, finally destroying Crimson Jihad after a series of wild military maneuvers (at one point with Schwarzenegger piloting a Harrier jet) but not until the jihadists detonate a bomb on an island off Florida. Before their demise the terrorists are heard promising to explode a nuclear device in a major American city every week until US military troops are

director went so far as to employ people actually involved in the events, including air controllers and military personnel, to play their own parts. Elsewhere in the film he chose to cast actors with unfamiliar faces, giving the work the look of a historical documentary and lending it added authenticity.

A Mystical Discourse

High-profile Hollywood films dealing with terrorism may have reached their peak in the 1990s, but the genre—recast in a more sophisticated veneer—is sure to extend its longevity, attracting popular audiences in the US while the militarism/terrorism dialectic moves along its deadly path. Since US global military reach and jihadic terrorism are reverse sides of the same process, the "war on terror" can be expected to last years into the future. Cinematic as well as political approaches to terrorism inevitably mirror recent shifts in world politics, just as they reproduce key elements of domestic ideological hegemony: patriotism, the cult of guns and violence, glorification of technology, the hyper-masculine hero, obsession with "alien" threats. Such enduring motifs of American political and film culture are visible elsewhere across the entertainment industry—TV, video games, music, the Internet, comic books, and so forth—but the influence of cinema on mass consciousness has no parallel.

Hollywood movies built around terrorist plots thus have significance far beyond their power of diversion, merging as they do with moving images, cultural stereotypes, and ideological biases rendered all the more effective because of their seemingly non-political content. There are of course fearsome enemies to be identified, fought, and destroyed, usually by (white) male heroes armed with maximum force. As with earlier Nazis and Commies, these new enemies are not just military threats but challenge the very foundations of US national security, Western civilization, and global order. In the present milieu they are overwhelmingly Arabs and Muslims, but other villains enter the picture from time to time: Russians, Orientals, Nazis (still), Serbs, generic Communists (still), and a standard assortment of terrorists. At the same time, home-grown terrorists like those associated with local militias and other rightwing groups—the same circles that produced and nurtured the Oklahoma City bombers—rarely find their way into mainstream pictures since *domestic* terrorism is understood as having little to do with US *global* priorities. The emphasis on *alien* demons, moreover, is congruent with longstanding Manichean views of world politics where problems are framed in such a way as to encourage military "solutions."

Although political terrorism is centuries old and spans virtually every ideological, national, religious, and ethnic group, recent Hollywood cinema prefers to focus on Arabs and Muslims, visible in such popular fare as the *Delta Force* series, *The Siege*, *The Sum of All Fears*, *The Peacemaker*, and even the more balanced *Syriana* (2005). In these films, as mentioned earlier, the demonized Other appears as a monolithic culture of thuggish male warriors who relish violence, directed mostly against innocent civilians, and who lack motives beyond hatred and jealousy. Despite their lack of intellectual sophistication and political strategy, however, such warriors are depicted as a grave threat to the very foundations of civilized society. As an FBI agent states in *The Sum of All Fears*, "These Arabs are attacking our way of life", a sentiment that increasingly permeates the film industry and political system, especially after 9/11.

For the past two decades TV and cinema have caricatured jihadic terrorism as irredeemably evil, the product of a deformed mentality lacking human or rational standards of behavior—its adherents perfect targets for extermination. Such representations flow from an essentially metaphysical or religious worldview, bereft of historical analysis, or political context. In the real world political violence is universal, used across disparate ideologies to create national states, fight repression, and defend the status quo, but in Hollywood it is reduced to the diabolical work of certain designated groups. Visual images, plot lines, musical scores, and sound effects merge to convey an epochal "clash of civilizations" thematic, as shady personality types (irrational, fanatical, sadistic) hostile to the US occupy center stage. The viewer will look in vain for any *political* backdrop consistent with complex, balanced views of how armed force is used by an array of state and non-state forces throughout the world. Violent political encounters never occur in a vacuum, but such a vacuum is precisely what nowadays defines Hollywood cinema. Lost is the common sense that Arab and Muslim antagonism to US imperial power, especially in its recent efforts to "remap" the Middle East, have been overwhelmingly *secular* and *political*, as shown by repeated public statements of al Qaeda and kindred groups; religious fundamentalism does play a role, but hardly a decisive one. Far from being mysterious or irrational, popular Arab/Muslim anger toward the US turns on several mundane (and globally recognized) outrages: American geopolitical hegemony, a long history of military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere, unwavering support for Israel, enforcement of a neo-liberal globalization regime. These issues are routinely ignored or downplayed in both Hollywood movies and the larger media culture, as the more convenient and self-serving "clash" scenario is preferred.

In a universe where "terrorism" is depicted as a monolithic scourge to be extirpated by maximum armed force, further expansion of US global military power ends up as a logical corollary. Insofar as world politics can be framed as the struggle of good versus evil, democracy versus tyranny, and civilization versus barbarism, the Bush administration has been able to legitimate its unilateralism and militarism while moving to upgrade the Pentagon's high-tech arsenals, rapid troop deployments, aerial/space capabilities, and intelligence system—all vital to solidifying the permanent war system. While such representations are easily visible within the film industry, for marketing purposes Hollywood still favors male action-hero narratives drawn from the legacy of John Wayne, James Bond, Rambo, and Schwarzenegger, whose warrior roles owe more to the hyper-masculine, individualistic ethos of the frontier than to routine operations of the Pentagon war machine. For terrorist dramas the difference between victory and defeat often comes down to the last-minute heroics of warrior-saviors. In *True Lies* it is Schwarzenegger who manages superhuman counter-terrorist exploits in almost single-handedly rescuing the world from catastrophe, but who in the end must rely on updated combat technology (the Harrier jet) to prevail. Comparable scenarios unfold in *Patriot Games*, *The Peacemaker*, and *The Siege*. *Air Force One* contains a plot in which the US president (Harrison Ford**)** thwarts a terrorist scheme by his own daring exploits. The new superheroes recall earlier figures who, like Wayne and Bond, could satisfy American viewers' fantasies of male heroes vanquishing terrible demons—whether from outer space, in the form of ideological devils, or simply nameless enemies lurking about the landscape. As the capacity of non-state terrorists to wreak real-life destruction increases—bolstered

by possible access to weapons of mass destruction—so too has the power of hyper-masculine saviors in their anointed destiny to save the world from unspeakable horrors. And as public fear of new terrorist episodes understandably persists, that fear sooner or later finds resonance within a media that remains a transmission belt of paranoid and frightful impulses. Ray Pratt suggests that cultural paranoia, "widespread in American films, television, and popular novels," is a "subjective reflection of the perceived powerlessness of the American public."[5]

The Dark Side of Modernity

Images and narratives of "terrorism" within media culture reveal the extent to which American public opinion has become insulated and provincial, the sign of a population shielded from knowledge of the global repercussions of its own nation's foreign and military (not to mention economic) policies. As Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies write: "America has the power and resources to refuse self-reflection. More pointedly, it is a nation that has developed a tradition of being oblivious to self-reflection."[6] In this atmosphere Hollywood has done its share to encourage a narrow political culture that nurtures the conditions (while sidestepping the *consequences*) of unbridled imperial power. Indeed the film industry has fully engaged the durable legacy of US colonial violence and conquest, visible in Westerns, combat movies, action spectacles, sci-fi pictures, and related fare. The recent cycle of terrorist-action films is simply another extension (and refinement) of this legacy. Across US history various forms of political violence have been embraced as an instrument—often the *preferred* instrument—to achieve national interests. As might be expected of any campaign against evildoers, violence easily takes on cathartic and redemptive features—in warfare as in movies. At the same time, discourses on violence reflect the double standard permeating so much of the American public sphere: violence is sanctioned, even celebrated, in the service of US power and wealth but is treated as a violation of civilized values when used by others. (In this vein, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction is fiercely denounced, viewed as deserving preemptive military action, while US possession of its own vast arsenal of such weapons is regarded as normal, indeed virtuous in support of worldwide "democracy.") Larger-than-life images of threatening villains willing to destroy civilization are vital to the efficacy of such propaganda, and nowhere are these images more powerful than in Hollywood movies owing to their range of assets: dazzling technology, seductive cinematography, fast-paced action sequences, gripping narratives of heroic people fighting valiantly against horrible monsters, and use of entertainment to conceal propaganda.

Widespread legitimate public fear of real-life terrorism enables the media to sensationalize one of the greatest symbols of modern barbarism through visual constructions of savage Others bringing death and destruction to innocent populations for no reason beyond their own pathological disorders. The terrorist personality is nihilistic, a trait typical of deranged serial killers and mass

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[5] Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), p. 8.
[6] Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?* (New York: Disinformation, 2002), p. 13.

murderers. Within media culture sinister enemies of civilization lurk everywhere, their barbaric agendas often covered up by seemingly normal lives—a narrative shared by journalists as well as the vast majority of politicians and academics. Thus Walter Laqueur, a leading expert on terrorism, writes that "fanaticism inspired by all kinds of religious-sectarian-nationalist convictions is now taking on a millenarian and apocalyptic tone." In terrorism he sees recurring elements of criminality reflected in "the rise of small sectarian groups that lack clear agendas other than destroying civilization, and in some cases humankind," agents characterized by nothing so much as "blind aggression," "suicidal impulses," and "sheer madness."[7] In other words, the new terrorist personality is distinct from anything that went before it, so utterly sui generis and irrational as to defy historical or even psychological analysis. Along these lines, Neal Gabler writes of a jihadic violence that is based on pre-modern, fundamentalist outlooks, a complete attack on logic and reason, with utter hostility to progress, democracy, and secular order.[8] How acts of political violence carried out by al Qaeda and similar groups are supposed to differ qualitatively from varieties of *state* terrorism, or even from the long history of non-state terrorist operations, is never explained by mainstream writers like Laqueur and Gabler.

Media culture has spawned an entirely new category of human being—a category of terrorist that ostensibly captures the essence of contemporary jihadic violence. The personality type exists beyond history, beyond politics, beyond psychology, a type so irredeemably evil and irrational that no normal mode of interpretation is possible. Even historical Commies and fascists were typically shown to be motivated human beings with certain ideas, interests, and identities—craven beings, to be sure, but still part of an intelligible universe. Even hardened criminals and drug addicts may be regarded as subject to social and psychological analysis, whereas "terrorists" are people whose sole purpose is to cause great pain and suffering.[9] It follows that the modern terrorist amounts to nothing more than a cancerous intrusion into an otherwise healthy body politic, immune from standard legal sanctions and efforts at rehabilitation. As a toxic force, therefore, terrorism can only be removed by maximum force. The physical habitats of such toxic agents—Fallujah in Iraq, for example—become open terrain for total warfare, an arena where all the horrors of technowar are permissible. This is why the torture of prisoners defined as "terrorists" is so easily justified, and practiced, and why the US government can insist that anyone fitting that label has no rights under the Geneva Convention. This new "terrorist personality"—faceless, sinister, innately violent—has appeared hundreds of times over in the recent cycle of Hollywood terrorist-action films that continue to reap enormous box-office revenues.

Situating the phenomenon of terrorism historically, Jean Baudrillard calls attention to the spectacular, mirror-like features of political violence and its ideological representations within the media as a whole. In 1993 he argued that "the violence of old was both more enthusiastic and sacrificial than ours," whereas contemporary violence is a product of hyper-modernity, with political terror

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[7] Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 5.

[8] Neal Gabler, "An Eternal War of Mind-Sets", *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2001.

[9] Doug Lummis, "'Terrorist' as New Human Type", *CounterPunch*, December 1–15, 2002, p. 1.

"a simulacrum of violence, emerging less from passion than from the screen, a violence in the nature of the image." Baudrillard found that it is possible to specify a dialectical relationship between terrorist actions as such and the growing media fascination with them—a social process in which the two are intimately chained to each other.[10] In present-day media culture, therefore, what journalists and politicians routinely call "terrorism" is more accurately viewed as a mode of political activity that both *reflects* and helps *create* a violent society of the spectacle where pervasive feelings of fear, anxiety, and paranoia are reproduced daily. Scanning the post-9/11 political terrain, one encounters the paradox that while radical Islam is uniformly identified in the media with a desperate return to pre-industrial, fundamentalist, anti-Western values, it flourishes within a distinctly *modern* universe, that is, an urban, bureaucratic, high-tech, globalized system where media culture continuously shapes and reshapes elements of popular consciousness. Baudrillard views terrorism as one side of a globalized modernity made possible by advanced technology, geographical mobility, open flows of communication, and the breaking down of territorial divisions. Thus the emphatically *international* terrorism of al Qaeda and kindred groups ultimately corresponds to the very transnational corporate system it depends upon for expertise, funding, mobility, recognition, and perhaps above all conditions generating blowback. Globalization as an economic, political, and *cultural* process ironically feeds into modern terrorism, both state and non-state, as political violence extends its worldwide impact while sharpening its capacity to attack, disrupt, and surprise—the same features now so integral to the Hollywood film industry. Thus jihadic terrorism emerges not only as a virulent form of blowback against US imperial domination but as the possibly darkest side of neo-liberal globalization.

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[10] Jean Baudrillard, *The Transformation of Evil* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 75–76.