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## The Aesthetics of Terrorism and the Temporalities of Representation

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## The Aesthetics of Terrorism and the Temporalities of Representation

Robert Appelbaum

### Abstract

Representations of terrorism, in fiction and non-fiction, summon their readers and viewers to examine terrorism in any of at least four modes of temporality: the past, the past perfect, the continuous present, and the simple present. This essay explains those modalities and shows how they work with reference to novels, a film documentary, and contemporary American television, including the documentary *Black September* and the series *NCIS*. The modalities are ideological as well as narratological functions and are sometimes employed to occlude the historical and pragmatic dimensions of terrorist violence. Terrorism is always already aesthetic and “hyperreal,” in Jean Baudrillard’s sense of the word, but to contemplate the aesthetics of terrorism is to occupy a certain geopolitical and historical position with regard to it, in addition to a location in hyperreality.

### Key Words

aesthetics; Jean Baudrillard; Black September; hyperreality; *NCIS*; temporality; terrorism

### 1. Terrorist theatrics

Reading a story about North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in *The New York Times*, I twice came upon the word ‘theatrics.’ Kim Jong-un was engaging in theatrics in preparation for his meeting with President Trump, posing for pictures and issuing statements. The word seemed to indicate something unnecessary and excessive: a show of something that didn’t need to be shown except for the sake of showing it. But it also indicated a strategy of trying to influence political life. The word

'theatrics,' in such a case, is nearly synonymous with 'publicity stunt,' which in the political world today is frequently tied to the word 'spin.' Theatrics, the publicity stunt, spin, excessive though they may be, are familiar attempts to influence public opinion and therefore influence political allies and adversaries. Since Jean Baudrillard's writing on "simulacra," however, there has been reason to doubt this common understanding. According to Baudrillard, such theatrics, public relations, or spin are not simply interventions in the interpretation of political realities; in fact, they create their own realities or, more precisely, they generate "models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." [1] Kim Jon-un successfully hyperrealized himself.

Baudrillard's theory was a challenge to traditional ideas about interpretation, whether in linguistics, philosophy, hermeneutics, or communications theory. Traditional theory recognizes that communication is frequently faulty, that between the sender of a message, the message itself, and the receiver of the message all kinds of interference may irrupt. The same goes for our knowledge of what we take to be objective realities. We never experience the "thing-in-itself." But according to Baudrillard, such notions of interference or perspectival limitation belong to an earlier era, the era of production. We are now in a different era, the era of simulation, and the problem is not so much that it is hard to send or receive messages or glimpse reality as it really is, but that there is no reality apart from hyperreality, and message-sending-and-receiving has taken on a life of its own. [2]

Whatever the salience of Baudrillard's theory in general, it certainly has a lot to tell us about terrorism, as Baudrillard himself came to be aware. [3] For while it is clear that one of the main features of terrorism is to send a message, a message of protest, of hatred, of intimidation, of demands for recognition, it is also to *create its own* realities, or, to make it clearer so that we can avoid the term 'reality' and the ambiguities and controversies it evokes, its own (hyperreal) *circumstances*. In sending messages, terrorist violence engages in theatrics. [4] And its theatrics is not merely an effort to influence public opinion; it is to change the circumstances of and for public opinion. That it comes with disruption, death, and destruction is part of the strategy or tactic; disruption, death, and destruction are the ultimate signifiers of terrorist violence, and also its ultimate signifieds. Terrorist violence changes or is meant to change the political circumstances against which it is waged by annihilating part of that circumstances' substance; or, as Baudrillard might put it, by disrupting the signifying chain of dominant simulations by reaching from the symbolic world into death.

Some specialists in communication studies have tried to use Baudrillard-like insights to explain the social life of terrorism.[5] In their eyes, terrorism is part of what Victor Turner would call a “social drama,” in which the agents of terrorism are in a strange alliance with the witnesses of terrorism.[6] An event occurs; the mass media respond; and a new, largely theatrical dialogue ensues, where the media mediate the meaning of what has occurred, at once reinforcing the platforms of terrorists and establishing chains of simulations, where those on the side of the victims or the perpetrators find a panoply of fields of dissent, resistance, triumph, and grief. Modern terrorism requires the mass media—and the somewhat naughty implication is that the mass media require terrorism.

## 2. Black September

The classic example may come not from 9/11 but from the notorious Munich Massacre at the 1972 Olympics. In those days, international terrorists commonly took hostages and made specific demands contingent upon their release. The Black September group, affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, took eleven hostages from the Israeli Olympic team and demanded the release of 234 political prisoners. A stunning documentary of the incident, entitled *One Day in September*, by Kevin McDonald in 1999, won the Academy Award for documentaries that year.[7] Apart from gruesome recreations and footage of the violence (all hostages, a German police officer, and five of the terrorists were killed), one of the most startling sequences showed American sportscasters, led by the redoubtable Jim McKay, trying to cope with the news, a kind of news that they were not prepared for. In this case it is clear that mass media did not require terrorism at all. Instead, terrorism was an imposition, a defiance of the script, whose subtext was the bringing of the Olympics to Munich less than thirty years after the Holocaust, with a special welcome to Israeli athletes. It was alarming. At 3.45 a.m., as shown in the film, McKay reported from a feed plugged into his ear, “We just got the final word . . . you know, when I was a kid, my father used to say ‘Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized.’ Our worst fears have been realized tonight. They’ve now said that there were eleven hostages. Two were killed in their rooms yesterday morning, nine were killed at the airport tonight. They’re all gone.” He seemed to be struggling to hold back his tears.

There was more news to come, including the hijacking of a Lufthansa flight, caused to land in Libya, and a successful attempt to free two of the Black September prisoners, which gave the hijackers a worldwide platform for expressing their grievances. Having lost the main battle, Black September

recovered itself not only as an effective paramilitary core, but also as a media star. But let us leave the aftermath, about which many legends have been created and criticisms tendered, and think about the day in September as a model for the communications theory of terrorism.

Terrorists, or at least some terrorists, the terrorists we know most about, need the media. Private, hidden acts of terrorism may have some usefulness on some occasions, but the main impulses toward terrorism in the last 120 years have required publicity. The media perhaps do not *need* terrorism. On some occasions, as during the 1972 Olympics, terrorism was unneeded, unwanted, a terrible suspension of everyday life; the Olympic games were called off temporarily. But the media are part of the social drama, part of the terrorist technology of changing political reality by changing its signifiers in exchange for death or the threat of death. John McKay's feelings were probably sincere, but they were expressed in the making of a social drama. And in this social drama came aesthetics.

Aesthetics: there is no end to it today, as Baudrillard also suggested. In the absence of the real, it has become an irreducible medium of social life. But it has not become, as Baudrillard hoped, a medium of progressive struggle. Baudrillard pointed to graffiti as an example of an aesthetic medium that countered the aesthetic of sameness that late capitalism imposed on its subjects. Perhaps, in some places, like graffiti-laden contemporary Athens, that may still be true. But on the whole, though many cases of the fine arts today, along with popular arts like movies and television, continue to exert themselves as media of reflection and critique, the aesthetic dimension of life is not today a major force of resistance, opposition, or change.[8]

That is where terrorism comes in, as does the fear, voiced for example by a character in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, that terrorism has taken over from art.[9] "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken over that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated." [10]

### 3. The temporal modalities of terrorist theatrics

By now, international terrorism has probably lost some of its power to "raid human consciousness," since it has become so familiar, although who knows what the next major incident will be, who it will affect, and how it will be received? I write, on June 11, 2018, in the middle of a calm, at least in the West, while the major raids on human consciousness—who would have believed it?—are being made by politicians, politicians of what we still call

“the right,” attempting and, to some extent, succeeding, by apparently peaceful means, to undermine liberal democracy. Where Osama bin Laden and Anders Behring Breivik failed, Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán may well be succeeding. But in America, at least, Donald Trump aside, a simulacrum of terrorism has gripped public attention: the school shooting, often orchestrated as a terrorist attack and motivated by emotional needs that are frequently found among terrorists themselves: “I’ll show them! I will get my revenge!” And so they do, with or without a follow-up suicide, disrupting the symbolic order by replacing it with death.[11]

We don’t know what’s coming next. We never did, but there have been many times in the history of the West when people thought they did; in the 1990s, it was believed that in the future nothing was coming next. Baudrillard himself contributed an essay to a volume called *Looking Back on the End of the World*, a melancholic volume where some very talented figures struggled with their nostalgia for the future.[12] Undoubtedly, we don’t know what is coming next, and that means we don’t know where or when the next major terrorist attack will take place or what its effect will be. We who write about terrorism do so in the shadow of a specter, and all our certainties about what happened in the past may be useless in the face of terrorism to come.

That is what is wrong about the communications theory model of terrorism; even my own previous work in this field may be wrong in this way. It assumes that what has happened is, in brief, *what happens*. Such theorizing exists in a timeless world, operating by eternal principles of causes and effects, of motives and reactions, of circumstances and disruptions, of perpetrators and victims. It is rather the case, however, that what we talk about when we talk about terrorism, or what we write or film or broadcast about it, comes in any of at least four temporal modes: terrorism is either something that *happened*, that *has happened*, that *is happening*, or, simply, that *happens*. It is the same whether the terrorist event is real or fictional, especially when the aesthetic dimensions of a terrorist event are taken into account.

Let’s think again about the example of the Munich Olympics. My own account of it was of something that *happened*, and in writing about it I arranged my discourse into a certain order, with due respect for chronology, in keeping with a certain point of view, and a certain appeal not only to logic but also emotion. I could not help adding the detail that McKay seemed to be struggling to hold back his tears, a detail which may remind Americans of the famous moment on television when Walter Cronkite of CBS announced the death of John F. Kennedy, in the



wake of another notorious terrorist event. Such an aesthetic take on the event may well resonate with readers, especially those who remember the assassination of JFK or, for that matter, the Munich Olympics, but it will not resonate with all potential readers. Some have no memory of either event. And in any case, when it comes to the Munich Olympics, there is also the Palestinian side of the story, or several Palestinian and other non-Western, anti-Western, or Western-dissident sides to the story, that I have not attempted to imagine. The truth is, to begin to talk about the aesthetics of terrorism is to begin from an already aestheticized point of view, in this case the point of view of an inhabitant of an OECD country, a native American, and a bystander with a long memory of major terrorist episodes, for whom, as Baudrillard puts it, along with so many others of my world, terrorism has become *my image*, even the image of *myself*.

When “we” speak of the aesthetics of terrorism today, we speak as the subjects of a certain image or groups of images, where “we” find both adversity and identity. Those are *our* terrorists to whom we react and of whom we speak; they belong to us the way our faces in a mirror belong to us. Yet even so, most terrorist attacks today, a large margin, according to the Global Terrorism Index, are undertaken in non-OECD nations, especially Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria and Pakistan.[13] That is not a recent phenomenon. “Over the last 17 years,” the report asserts, “99 per cent of all terrorist deaths occurred in countries that are either in conflict or have high levels of political terror.”[14] To begin as I have is to begin from the point of view of an inhabitant of a non-distressed territory, having a high-functioning government, relatively efficient law enforcement, no major international or internal military conflicts, and a good protection of basic human rights, that finds itself in a distressed hyperreality. There are dangerous groups and individuals out there, in the OECD, in the United States, and there are some occasional home-grown incidents, but, with the exception of Turkey and Israel, they are not endemic and they are not *ours*.

When I recounted the incident of the Munich massacre earlier, I focused on it as something that *happened*, in 1972. Or rather, I focused on it as something that *had happened* for most people who remember it. But, for some social theorists, the massacre is a case of something that *happens*. The Munich massacre, for such theorists, is an example of *what happens* when a major terrorist incident is the focus of the mass media. It becomes a “classic” example. Meanwhile, the focus of that fine documentary, *One Day in September*, may be said to be on what *has happened*. Like many good documentaries, the film brings a past event into the present; it asks its viewers to think about what it is like to live in a world where something like this has

happened. Interviews with survivors, in the present of the film, underscore this dimension. The massacre *has happened*, and it has changed the world we live in, among other things, by changing Western police tactics and strategies in the face of terrorist threats, and by changing world opinion, for better or worse, about Israel and Palestine.[15] Meanwhile, being structured more or less chronologically, the documentary asks us to experience the event as something that *is happening*. Along with our newscasters and film crews, we experience surprise, expectation, and suspense, wanting to know not only what just happened but what will happen next.

In fiction, the same principles apply. In Honoré de Balzac's 1829 novel, *Les Chouans*, the story of an attempted insurrection during the years of the French Revolution, is an affair of the past. It happened. It happened long ago. But in Don DeLillo's 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, the main focus is in the present perfect. 9/11 *has happened*. It has already started when the novel begins, and most of the narrative, as is the case with such earlier novels as William Trevor's *My House in Umbria* (1991), dealing with the aftermath of a train bombing in Italy, is concerned with recovery from trauma.[16] The event has happened: now what?

#### 4. The distribution of the modalities

In thrillers, whether in fiction, film, or television, terrorism is commonly something that *is happening*. Produced in keeping with the medium of suspense, thrillers focus on terrorist plots that may or may not succeed, and also on efforts at terrorism prevention that, again, may or may not succeed. Retrospection may sometimes occur, either for the sake of character development or for the sake of plot enrichment, but the chief focus is on seeing through to the end of a plot of destruction. Alfred Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942), for example, begins with sabotage in an aircraft factory and ends with the foiling of a plot to blow up a navy battleship and the death of the chief saboteur.[17] He falls, all too symbolically, off the edge of the torch of the Statue of Liberty. In a characteristic Hitchcockian mode, for most of the film it is difficult for the filmgoer to keep up with what is happening: heroes turn into villains, villains into heroes; hatred turns into love, love into hatred; the master plot goes undisclosed for much of the film, and the main character, a man on the run for a terrorist crime he did not commit, is usually unsure of what is happening to him, of what he is doing, or where he will go, the film taking us on an unplanned journey from California to New York City. *Saboteur* is a nearly pure example of terrorism as something that *is happening*. It is reassuring that in the end it stops happening, and even more so that it stops happening because of acts of heroism and an unforgettable struggle inside and outside the crown of the



Statue of Liberty. But not until the end is it not the case that terrorism is something that is happening.

There is still one more continuous-present-tense dimension to *Saboteur*. Filmed shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the movie is in part a cautionary tale about a Fifth Column of Nazi-sympathizers in America, especially among the upper classes. Although such a Fifth Column was more prominent in Hitchcock's native England than the United States, the movie promotes a somewhat paranoid view of the dangers that the United States was facing during the build-up to the Second World War, possibly with reference to the notorious Business Plot or White House Coup of 1933, a message saying that there is not only an enemy without but an enemy within.[18] And so, not just in the film but in the real world, *terrorism is happening*, even in the face of the fact that war is happening, too.

The condition that *Saboteur* seldom if ever slides toward, though, is the present indefinite: the point of view according to which terrorism simply happens. The reason is that although the film always takes place in the now, its present is carefully historicized and localized and its characters are scrupulously developed. But there are representations of terrorism, both fictional and non-fictional, that avoid such particularities and propose that terrorism is just something that happens.

A prime example is the 1975 novel *Black Sunday*, by Thomas Harris, of Hannibal Lecter fame.[19] Harris has claimed that he was inspired by the Munich Olympics and the Black September group, but the novel switches from the political moment of the Olympics to a timeless moment of revenge and suicidal despair. Its main villainess, Dahlia Iyad, is a Palestinian sex bomb, done up in a cartoonish manner; its main villain, Michael Lander, is a deranged military veteran, now the pilot of an advertising blimp, who wants to get even with the world by killing himself and as many other people as possible. The two conspire to blow up Tulane Stadium in New Orleans in the middle of the Super Bowl. Although the novel is not without insight into the psychology of terrorists and the symbolic nature of terrorist violence, it has changed a political quarrel into a psychopathological quarrel, where the terrorists are as much at war with themselves as they are with the outside world. It depicts terrorism as something that, well, just happens, when bad people are given the opportunity to act out. The choice of the Super Bowl, however implausible it may be, underscores the novel's understanding of terrorism as a strictly ritualistic event. And rituals, of course, are indefinitely repeatable.

One can hardly determine how far back the idea goes that terrorism is something that just happens, although there are suggestions of that idea already in Chesterton's *The Man Who*

*Was Thursday*, published in 1908.[20] But it seems that since 9/11, in the West and in other non-aggrieved territories, the concept has proliferated, especially in popular culture. The most historically embedded of crimes, terrorism has emerged in popular culture as a timeless battle between good and evil, often with the evilness of the evil more dramatically emphasized than the goodness of the good, for the “good” is more reactive than proactive: it simply responds to evil and tries to contain it.

## 5. The tenses of American television

Prime examples come from American television, where programs about political violence frequently combine a “terrorism-is-happening” pretense of suspense with a “terrorism-happens” pretense of ritual. The most prominent programs of this were probably *24* and *Homeland*, series devised in the aftermath of 9/11, dedicated to making high drama, and every now and then some sense, about global terrorist threats.[21] The storylines were, to say the least, highly complicated. But what was terrorism in the first few seasons of either series? It was almost always something unreasonable, motivated by a psychology of resentment. Terrorism was happening because terrorism happens, given that sometimes people are resentful.

A second and more egregious example of indefinite presentism comes in the *NCIS* franchise, along with its offshoots *NCIS Los Angeles* and *NCIS New Orleans*. *NCIS* is part of a larger development in American and British television, the forensic drama, which became especially popular after the debut of a series called *CSI*, or *Crime Scene Investigation*, in 2000.[22] Whether or not episodes follow the classic pattern of a “whodunit,” the essential drama focuses on forensic scientists who are also criminal investigators, working in labs and behind computer screens, and the series have an unusual characteristic in common that distinguishes them from earlier crime programs like *Hill Street Blues* or *NYPD* or, for that matter, *The Sopranos*. The storylines focus almost entirely on investigators solving crimes by way of science and technology, with a major part of their time spent in their offices and labs. Though back stories come aplenty (love lives, estranged parents, intra- and inter-force rivalries), they create little noise. The crews are seldom working on more than one case at a time. They seldom find themselves compelled to make priorities among different cases. They rarely encounter budget constraints or manpower shortages, although sometimes rival agencies or thick-headed bureaucrats impede them. There is rarely any doubt about what *the problem* is in the world of forensic drama—a dead body—although in the real world, even in the real world of law enforcement, not to mention the worlds of more accomplished

forms of fiction, what the problem is that needs to be solved is often unknown and sometimes unknowable.

Meanwhile, computer technology does at least half of the work. When criminals are on the loose, computer searches and computer-assisted forensics almost invariably track them down, with the help of surveillance cameras, cell phone towers, and even drones. The programs seem designed to celebrate the power of American technology, bravery, and persistence to defeat the forces of evil. Or, as one astute critic, Scott Campbell, puts it, alluding to the *CSI* franchise, the formula of the new forensic drama “exhibits a radical faith in science and technology and a corresponding suspicion, even fear, of conventional narration.”[23] If conventional narration, as Campbell implies, is fraught with ambiguity and doubt, surprise and frustration, the modern forensic drama eliminates the perils of narrative by replacing them with the presumed certainty of scientific process. And the popularity of this kind of drama stems from the trauma of 9/11, Campbell and other critics have argued. As Ellen Burton Harrington puts it, “the contemporary forensic drama attempts to reassure viewers with the fantasy that the United States can be secured amid threats of violence and terrorism; that individual identity, as well as national identity, can be fixed and scientifically assured. . . . Readers and viewers alike are encouraged to set aside scientific scepticism and immerse themselves in a fantastic world where ambiguous or disruptive identities can be fixed by the traces or DNA left by the individual; a world where crime can be solved, the truth known with certitude, and order restored.”[24]

## 6. *NCIS*

But two qualifications need to be made, at least with respect to *NCIS*. The first is that for all its reliance on technological wizardry—hair follicles caused to point fingers, scraps of paint that indicate the year, model, and eventually the owner and the location of a car, and so on—*NCIS* seldom fails to humanize the use of technology, including the sometimes comic foibles of the individuals who use it, and to underscore that technology needs to be supplemented with apparently irrational or at least risky human effort. Clues can be misleading. They can have been planted to steer investigators astray. They can be booby-trapped. They can make action seem futile, even though action, even when based on a mere hunch, is what a situation may demand. And second, not to be forgotten: criminals/terrorists can use advanced technology, too. The agents at *NCIS* are sometimes in a struggle against their own evidence in addition to their own scientific weapons. In every episode, there is probably at least one incident where the agents, acting on probable rather than certain information, on hunches rather

than deduction, have to take out their weapons and pursue a suspect, risking their lives. Chase scenes and gun battles are regularly recruited to move the action along, thus leaving the worship of science and technology behind in favor of good old-fashioned violence.

As far as terrorism goes, science and technology are seldom enough. Patterns of behavior need to be established, strategies discerned, tactics anticipated. Terrorists are assumed to have profiles that can only be deduced from psychological speculation and financial and strategic backers who are almost always suspected rather than known. Most important, for all the efforts of the agency, and for all their science and technology, sometimes the terrorists seem to win.[25] In the second season of *NCIS* ("Twilight," Season 2, Episode 23, 24 May 2005), one of the main characters is shot dead by a terrorist. In the previous episode ("SWAK," Season 2, Episode 22, 10 May 2005), a main character is seized with poisoning from an anthrax-like powder (it is actually a carrier of the bubonic plague) and almost dies. In still another ("Shabbot Shalom," Season 10, Episode 11, 8 January 2013), the head of the Israeli agency Mossad is tracked down on a visit to Washington and captured and assassinated by Palestinian terrorists working for an Israeli. In another ("Kill Chain," Season 11, Episode 12, 7 January 2014), a terrorist plot to bomb a government building where a party is being held succeeds, killing a number of victims and paralyzing the fiancé of one of the main characters. In one of the more politically alert storylines ("Masquerade," Season 7, Episode 14, 2 February 2010), a defense contractor stages a terrorist attack in order to influence Congress to raise more money for defense. And again, in one of the series' most touching storylines ("Dead Letter" and "Family First," Season 13, Episodes 23 and 24, 10 May 2016 and 17 May 2016, respectively), one of the main characters, now retired to her family home in Israel, is murdered by a double-agent terrorist once affiliated with the CIA. To adapt a line from Jerry Lee Lewis, there's a whole lot of terrorism going on in the world of *NCIS*. In Washington D.C alone there have been over a dozen lethal attacks in the few years of the show.

Terrorism in *NCIS* has been distributed. The culprits include not only radical Islamists and Palestinian freedom fighters but also Israelis, assassins for hire, Columbian para-militants, crazed computer geeks, and American businesspeople. In one of the most harrowing storylines (Season 9, Episodes 22-24 and Season 10, Episode 1, 1 May, 8 May and 15 May 2012 and 25 September 2012), a wealthy businessman, Harper Dearing, played by Adam Schiff, goes on a mission to get revenge against the American Navy. His own son, a Navy recruit, was killed in a terrorist attack while on duty, and Dearing blames the Navy's incompetence and negligence for it. At one point, he sends a

video message explaining himself and asserting that he is going to kill some people so that many more people will live. In the climactic episode, he sets off a bomb just outside the facility where the NCIS works and an unspecified number of people are killed or maimed.

Like other terrorists in the series, Harper Dearing is extremely talented at what he does; in retrospect, unbelievably talented. He is always a step ahead of the Navy, NCIS, and the FBI. An elderly gentleman with no experience in combat or crime, he can foil and kill federal agents single-handedly. His bombs are not just home-made apparatuses but military-capable devices that can be set off remotely. We see the wiring, the timing device, the electrodes, the connections to explosive material, and it all looks like something designed and manufactured for export by General Electric.

And then there is the question of the motive. As is the case with most terrorists in *NCIS*, Dearing has a deficiency of motive. There is only one, really, despite what he claims: revenge. Dearing has responded to a loss caused by what he takes to be the negligence of the Navy, though he might also have considered that the loss was caused by the terrorists who attacked his son's ship. So he gets revenge on the Navy, an institution, although, as time goes by, he increasingly personalizes his target, moving on from trying to blow up Navy ships to going after the NCIS, perhaps because he thinks it failed to properly investigate the death of his son. After planting a bomb that nearly destroys NCIS headquarters, causing casualties that are never seen or reported ("Too many" is all the agency chief says when asked how many casualties there are), Dearing then goes after Leroy Jethro Gibbs, a chief investigator of the NCIS and the main character of the series.

However implausible the story—not the story of Dearing's anger but of what he plans and accomplishes when he acts upon it—it falls into line with a conventional interpretation of terrorist violence, its mainspring being resentment and frustration.[26] Also conventional is a conversion of resentment into a plan to attack not an individual but an institution. That's what terrorists do, by and large, and that is one of the most terrifying things about them. Yet when they attack institutions by attacking buildings and other structures, they also attack the people who inhabit them. Through this tactic terrorists transform violence into a symbolically potent act, even as it is also murderously destructive.[27] The violent symbolic act is at once metonymic and metaphoric: the buildings and the human victims are part of a whole and are destroyed as a part of a whole, and the message sent is a metaphorical substitution for the resentment and anger the culprit harbors. When Dearing finally directs his

destructive intentions toward Gibbs and Gibbs alone, he might be said to have moved from metonymy and metaphor to condensation and displacement, focusing his attention on one man, who has actually had nothing to do with his son's death, and thus displacing his anger from an institution onto an individual, or perhaps to a suicidal pact, another conventional feature of terrorist violence. Dearing gets the message to Gibbs that it is "either you or me," or perhaps "both you and me," that the violence ends with the death of either "one of us or both of us." In the last episode of the sequence ("Extreme Prejudice," Season 10, Episode 1, 25 September 2012), the two confront one another in an isolated country house, Dearing pulls a gun but Gibbs pulls a knife, and Gibbs kills Dearing in cold blood.

Resolution is a feature of terrorism thrillers. In the end, the culprit is dead, either by his or her own hands or by the hands of law enforcement officials, and maybe someone has been saved. Society goes on, even if it has been damaged. The NCIS gets back to work. To be fair, NCIS is not entirely coarse in this matter. When main characters are killed or maimed, the wounds linger. The dead are remembered. People's behavior changes as a response. But there are no changes in policies or in the mission of the NCIS, and hardly any consequences. And this inertia, so central to American television programming, is what distinguishes television terrorism from terrorism in the real world. At the diegetic moment, terrorism *is happening*; we are right there at the real time of the action. And in the overall scheme of the episode, it is explained to us that that is because *terrorism happens*. There is no other explanation. Aggrieved people will do such things.[28]

### **7. The inertia of television drama versus the historicity of terrorist events**

Inertia is built into conventional American crime drama series. Storylines come and go, characters change, sometimes characters come and go, but the *situation* remains unchanged. An ensemble of characters with fixed symbolic relationships to one another, like boss, friend, lover, rival, and so on, meet in the same space (an office, a lab, or the like), and find themselves called upon to respond to a disturbance. When the storyline is complete, they are back in the same space, with their symbolic positions intact. In this way, detective series like *NCIS* resemble that other American TV tradition, the situation comedy.[29] Here, of course, what is being presented is rather a situation drama, but the logic is the same.

The strength of the format almost goes without saying. An indefinite number of variations, from week to week and from year to year, can be played out with the same actors, the same set, and the same themes. The quality of the program may



depend on how creative the variations are—every show cannot be the same show—but, for the viewer and the characters alike, the variations come against the background of gratifying familiarity. Whether in comedy or drama, the ensemble are like, or sometimes literally are, a family, an idea that *NCIS* itself continually reiterates. “We’re family” several of the characters are given to say from episode to episode. And the basic situation—the living room, the office, the lab—is home.

One critic has thus analyzed *NCIS* as an allegory of the American family, and especially of masculine authority, which the program sometimes praises, sometimes mocks, and sometimes laments. [30] Several of the leading masculine authority figures, including Eli David, the Mossad chief and father to *NCIS* agent Ziva, and Mike Franks, the former *NCIS* agent, who was like a father to Gibbs, meet their deaths in the course of the show. But what happens, then, when this allegory is rehearsed in an environment of law enforcement and violence and, in particular, where counter-terrorist activity is a main agenda? What happens is that terrorism becomes a disruption of familial harmony, even if the family itself is constructed as a crime-solving and crime-preventing unit, with an intermittent focus on terrorism itself.

So, in the frame of an inert situation, terrorism *happens*, disrupting an inertia to which the situation will eventually return, though sometimes at the cost of life and limb. There are times, to be sure, when, in the pursuit of a terrorist incident to come, terrorism is also *happening*. We see the terrorist going about his or her business. There are times when the shadow of time past dims the present, in memory of an incident that *happened*. The agents talk about 9/11. There are moments of anxiety where it is recalled that terrorism *has happened*: the agents are still cleaning up after their building was bombed. Residues of the past remain. But the dominant mode is the continuous present.

I cannot claim logical rigor for my four temporal modalities. Nor can I claim that they are exclusive. One can imagine a condition of a continuous past, as in the French *imparfait*, and perhaps a modality where terrorism is conceived not as something that is happening but as something that *will happen*. Stories and dramas focused upon counter-terrorist agencies may be centered on anticipating the unknown, the terrorism to come. (For example, in *Homeland*, the main character’s obsession with that which, albeit unknown, is yet to come is dramatized as the product of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, mixed with manic depression, that is nevertheless, at least sometimes, prophetic. Although my categories are neither rigorous nor exclusive, they seem to work as heuristic devices, pointing toward how and why a certain sequence of actions is meant to mean.

When we encounter a representation of terrorist violence in narrative and in drama, we are encountering the imaginative mobilization of one or more temporal modalities. Granted that the phenomenon itself, terrorism, is intrinsically aesthetic, representations of terrorist events, fictional or non-fictional, usher us into temporal modalities that determine where and when the image of terrorism is to be found and where and when we are to be found along with it. There are always alternative perspectives of terrorist violence. However, even to discuss an aesthetics of terrorism is already to be drawn into a certain "we," a "we" for whom a certain consensus seems to have arisen related to terrorist events. Novels, documentaries, films and television shows, in the West, at least, all summon us back to this "we." But they summon us in keeping with modes of temporality that place us within or without the terrorist image. That so often in popular culture terrorism is just something that happens, that it is just something with the vaguest of a past, an unremarked residue in the present and an irrelevant future—well, that's entertainment. It's maybe even "our" entertainment. But we should beware of being taken hostage by it.

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## End Notes

[1] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p.1.

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant (Los Angeles: Sage, 1993).

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003).

[4] Brian Jenkins, *Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Paper Series, 1974). Also see Gabriel Weimann, "The Theater of Terror: The Psychology of Terrorism and the Mass Media," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 9, 3-4 (2005), 379-90; and Tyler Cowen, "Terrorism as Theater: Analysis and Policy Implications," *Public Choice*, 128 (2006), 233-244.

[5] Joseph S. Tuman, *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terror*, second edition (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010); Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication: A Critical Introduction* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012); Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of The Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); W. James Potter, *On Media Violence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999).

[6] Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1 (1980), 141-168.

[7] *One Day in September*, Feature Film, directed by Kevin MacDonald (Lionsgate, 1999).

[8] Reflection and critique are not of course to be sniffed at; they were said to be the main accomplishments of art in Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), and I think Marcuse's position is right. There will be those who disagree with such an analysis, all the same. Perhaps the most wrenching turn away from Marcuse's vision of art and politics comes in the work of Jacques Rancière, for example in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), where art is always engaged in the quasi-political, or maybe really political act of "distributing the sensible."

[9] For background see *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo*, eds. Peter Schneck, Philipp Schweighauser and Angeliki Tseti (New York: Continuum, 2010).

[10] Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 41.

[11] Caitlin M. Bonanno, and Richard L. Levenson, Jr. "School Shooters: History, Current Theoretical and Empirical Findings, and Strategies for Prevention," *Sage Open* (2014), pp. 1-11.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244014525425> (Accessed June 30, 2018)

[12] Dieter Kamper and Christoph Wulf, eds., *Looking Back on the End of the World*, trans. David Antal (New York: Semiotexte, 1989).

[13] Global Terrorism Index (2017), 10. <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf> Accessed May 21, 2018).

[14] Global Terrorism Index, 5.

[15] It was only in the aftermath of the Munich massacre that Germany devised an anti-terrorist military unit, and in much of the Western world there came to be adopted the principle of not negotiating with terrorists.

[16] I discuss *My House in Umbria* and other terrorist novels of the period in Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel, "Terrorism and the Novel, 1970–2001," *Poetics Today*, 29,3 (2008), 387-436.

[17] *Saboteur*, Motion Picture, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Universal Pictures, 1942).

[18] A BBC documentary on the plot is available on-line at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007tbs0>.

[19] Thomas Harris, *Black Sunday* (New York: Putnam, 1975).

[20] G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (London: Arrowsmith, 1908).

[21] Actually, *24* was planned before 9/11 but, with a few adjustments was, made immediately afterwards and first aired on November 6, 2001.

[22] Sarah Keturah Deutsch and Gray Cavender, "CSI and Forensic Realism," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 15 (2008), 34–53; Corinna Kruse, "Producing Absolute Truth: CSI Science as Wishful Thinking," *American Anthropologist*, 112,1 (2010), 79-91; David A. Kirby, "Forensic Fictions: Science, Television Production, and Modern Storytelling," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 44,1 (2013), 92-102; Deborah Jermyn, "Labs and Slabs: Television Crime Drama and the Quest for Forensic Realism," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 44,1 (2013), 103-109. For a general overview of detective fiction in contemporary television, see Mareike Jenner, *American TV Detective Dramas: Serial Investigations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

[23] Scott Campbell, "'Dead Men Do Tell Tales': *CSI*: Miami and the Case Against Narrative," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*, 8,1 (2009),

<http://ezproxy.its.uu.se/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.its.uu.se/docview/1519969207?accountid=14715>. (Accessed May 20, 2018)

[24] Ellen Burton Harrington, "Nation, Identity and the Fascination with Forensic Science in Sherlock Holmes and *CSI*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10,3 (2007), 365 – 382, ref. p. 366. Cited in Jenner, p. 127.

[25] The Wikipedia entry for *NCIS* includes a thorough description of all the episodes so far.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCIS\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCIS_(TV_series))

[26] See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Stern isolates five main kinds of grievances that lead to terrorist violence: alienation, humiliation, demographics, history and territory. All play a part in Dearing's resentment.

[27] A bulletin from June 26, 2018, as I continue writing this essay: An aggrieved federal employee, having been convicted for having harassed a former girlfriend, has just attacked the headquarters of the *Capital Gazette*, a local Maryland newspaper, and killed five of its employees. The newspaper had been covering his story, and the alleged assassin had unsuccessfully filed a defamation lawsuit against it. That he was attacking the institution and not particular employees would seem to be demonstrated by the fact that he shot at the employees through a glass window. The crime has not been labeled as terrorism, and has not been prosecuted in keeping with anti-terrorist protocol, but it resembles terrorism in many ways: it is a simulacrum of terrorism.

[28] A memory from the recent past: visiting Paris a few months after the dispersed attacks of November 14-15, 2015, which killed 130 people and injured 368. The streets are crowded with gendarmes bearing automatic rifles. Even the most innocuous of public venues, like the Musée Cluny, are subjected to heavy security protocol, with metal detectors and security agents checking handbags. The mood of the city is somber. People whisper to each other, "It's not our fault, we didn't do anything wrong."

[29] For a breezy account of the genre, see Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

[30] Thomas Gallagher, "Sins of the Father: *NCIS* and the Family at Work," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 49, 4 (2016), 875-96.

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