The Simulated Real: Aesthetics and the Semblance of the Real in Terroristic Images
by Salvador Miranda

The Desert of Jihadi John

In 2014 a series of iconic beheading videos surfaced on YouTube. Viewed by millions, these videos became quickly identifiable for their rolling desert landscapes, piercing blue sky, orange-clad kneeling victim, and an articulate host nicknamed Jihadi John. I cannot think of any image more associated with our vague notion of ISIS and its undefined territory than the balaclava-clad face of Jihadi John pointing his knife at us, standing somewhere in a desert of the Middle East. His interchangeable victims (James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, Peter Kassig, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto) are his bright orange prop as he recites in a London accent threats and demands. These videos have been endlessly analyzed, deconstructed and parodied, instantaneously repackaged by the media, and have even found a home in the world of art. They suggest a return to something far more real than popular media has ever been able to offer us. However, a persistent debate emerged along these videos claiming that they were staged in front of a green screen. When I take a closer look at these videos, it seems the desert he stands in is not quite real: the dunes are too caricaturish, the sand is too bright. It is hard to imagine why the videos would need to be staged at all.

Jihadi John and Steven Sotloff in the desert. Image: Reuters TV

Return of the Real

The endless representation and outright recreation of terroristic images in Western culture reminds us of their seductive power. They are at once captivating and horrible and often discussed in terms of the sublime. Moreover, they have been understood as the return of the Lacanian Real[1]. There is a longstanding complicity between war-making and picture taking (Mroué, 2012) dating back as early as Matthew Brady's extensive cataloguing of the American Civil War. As with most early photographers, they understood the picture as a medium for capturing reality and providing a faithful image of the world. In turn, images of violence and war faithfully captured their experience. The naiveté of this line of reasoning would come to be challenged in the 1960s, where photography and film were deconstructed as mere representations of the world; a framed distortion of the Real at best, and an outright manipulation by the image-maker at worst. But the emergence of

---

[1] In the context of this paper I specifically refer to Lacan's notion of that which cannot be reduced to the symbolic or semiotic.

terrorism and terroristic images has given rise to the notion of the Real once more. Boris Groys observed that "after so many decades of the critique of representation directed against the naïve belief in photographic and cinematic truth, we are now again ready to accept certain photographed and videotaped images as unquestionably true" (Groys, 2006, p. 99). Here is our inability to look away, our direct confrontation with the sublime in a society permeated by simulation. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek describes *The Trueman Show* as the ultimate Western neurotic fantasy (Zizek, 2002, p. 14). In this 90s film, the main character unknowingly lives inside a giant bubble, populated entirely with actors, props and a fake town. He is the unwitting star of a reality TV show, where everything in his world exists only to provide television drama. This solipsistic story taps into the peculiar sensation that is all too familiar for Westerners: the sensation that the safe, suburban world of plastic products, faux-materials, and artificial flavouring cannot possibly be real. In the 2016 documentary *HyperNormalisation,* Adam Curtis edits together a series of clips from other 90s films where citizens of western cities gaze upward toward an incoming disaster. Mouths open, they stand paralyzed before an off-screen spectre that threatens to annihilate them. These cuts are followed by clips of buildings being destroyed, Manhattan in flames, etc. The implication is evident: the desire for the Real is palpable in our media and thus the terrorism of the 21st Century (particularly that of 9/11) was already inscribed in our desire for the return of the Real. Terrorism finally breaks the fantasy bubble of the uneventful Western life and imposes itself through the Real's ultraviolence as an unspeakable wish fulfillment.

Ernst Junger celebrated the violence of World War I combat as the authentic Real. 100 years later, with the coordinates of the Real having been safely moved to the non-Western "other", terrorists emerge as actors delivering what Alain Badiou calls the "passion for the Real" (Žižek, 2002, p. 5). The artificiality of Western life is broken as the interjection of the Real is ushered in. For Žižek, this experience of the real became the ultimate and defining moment for our new century. But what are the consequences of the Real for a society that, as Curtis showed, primarily understands itself through constructed or media-produced images? Our experience of the Real through media (virtual reality as an experience of place, social media as an experience of interpersonal communication, scripted reality TV as an experience of empathy) sets up the preconditions for any intrusion of the Real to be neutralized. Žižek argues that that while the empirical reality of terrorism should not be denied, it is neutralized by the West in its image-based reception. It is important to reinforce this point: the empirical facts of violence are obvious and outside the scope of this argument. What is at stake is terror's symbolic power over us through our consumption of its image. Like Curtis' collection of Hollywood films of urban destruction, terrorism becomes the "semblance of the Real" that appeals to our desire for the Real (Žižek, 2002, p. 16). The reality that intrudes into our culture through violent acts of terrorism is quickly captured by the aesthetic representations of it that we produce. Here, "our pursuit of the Real through images remains our avoidance of it" (Žižek, 2002, p. 24). This pursuit has become relentless but remains firmly situated within the realm of the visual.

Re-enactment of the Semblance of the Real
If the violence of terrorism was ever a fantasy, it found its enactment in gaming culture. Since 9/11, video and computer games have increasingly allowed gamers to play as terrorists. Initially, these games failed to deliver meaningful opportunities to play as a terrorist, often anesthetizing the gamer's roleplaying by characterizing the virtual characters they controlled as 'double-agents' or 'infiltrators' (Schulzke, 2013). But progressively, games like *ARMA 3: Takistan*, *Insurgency: Sandstorm*, and *SQUAD* provide for surprisingly subjective explorations of terrorist role-playing, where "the video game avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and

participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities" (Rehak, 2003, p. 103). I explore the experience of these games in my work *Aim Down Sights* (2018). The video short explores roleplaying, both as victim and as terrorist, and the dedication of gamers to these online identities. The aesthetics of terroristic images are endlessly recreated in virtual worlds, while the immersive gaming experience creates quasi-real subjective realities for gamers. In numerous videos uploaded by gamers to YouTube, historical acts of terrorism are re-enacted, from specific events like 9/11, London's 2005 metro bombing, and the 2015 Thalys train attack, to more general events like airport shootings, plane hijackings, and vehicle-pedestrian attacks that now form part of our general image of terrorism. Some of these roleplaying games offer opportunities for gamers to invest time and energy into the characters they control, forging identities that require long-term negotiation. Here we find young British or American gamers fully committed to playing as a terrorist while putting on fake middle-eastern accents, developing their own backstory for their character's radicalization, and engaging in acts of terrorism. This engrossing and immersive roleplaying can be understood as the desire for the Real as it moves beyond aesthetics into a subjective experience.

Uploaded video of a videogame simulation of 9/11. Image still: Aim Down Sights (2018)

As a participant in any of these games, it is tempting to say this is the Real as entertainment. On YouTube, the constant replaying of these videos (including the performative replaying of historical events in videogames) ritualizes it. It would appear that we affirm it to be *at least* the semblance of the Real. Perhaps this obsession with re-enactment and role-playing allows for a radical change in perspective and a challenge to the good-vs-evil binary of the War on Terror as we step into the other's shoes (Schulzke, 2013, p. 208). However, these games' attention to graphic realism and aesthetic gameplay underscores the seductive qualities of terroristic images. The concern within these games is not with the substance but rather the visual aesthetics (beyond the intrinsic entertainment of gameplay). In this way, whatever subjective reality is experienced by the gamer is overtaken by roleplaying as image-making. The recreation of terroristic events is first and foremost an outward, formal (re)creation. It is the most explicit denial of the Real; a turning away from it by providing for its semblance in a high definition virtual reality where its performance can be endlessly recorded in search of its most spectacular representation.

Terrorism and its Appeal to Aesthetics

These worlds of virtual images fit neatly into Žižek's argument that terroristic images are a semblance of the real. But what can be said of terrorists and their own understanding or relation to the Real? Do they consciously manufacture this semblance, which has its roots in our entertainment? Žižek rightly points out that the attacks on the twin towers were made for the spectacle of the destruction, rather than for their unpredictable material destruction. The terrorists do not in fact deliver the desert of the Real since it is a desert containing only signifiers and images. Jihadi John is first and foremost an actor. The desert he stands on is (possibly quite literally) a stage where our desires play out for us. And while terrorism found its way into gaming culture, gaming culture was finding its way into terrorism. Head-cam videos of jihadi soldiers going into battle began to appear, borrowing heavily from first-person shooter (FPS) visual language. It is not merely the first-person perspective that they share: jihadi soldiers pick up and cycle through weapons as a gamer online, kill-shots are slowed down and replayed, and voice overs mimic 'kill-count' praise typical of gaming culture. Our familiarity with FPS games allows these GoPro video uploaders to tap into our established videogame sensibility and connects both through a particular language of aesthetics. Notably, the framed camera perspective is exactly the same in both. Here we have the idea of the potlatch (Bataille, 1991): a bizarre exchange between terrorist image-making and popular culture where both freely borrow and reinforce each other. In this uncanny physical externalization of Western digital culture, jihadists participate knowingly in the manufacture of our desires through entertainment. Meanwhile, gamers online engage in their own negotiations justifying their roleplaying or the permissibility of their virtual actions, often through the repetition of what emerges as a gaming mantra: "It's not real. It's just a videogame". As the appropriation of this visual language begins to create an uneasy indistinguishable aesthetic, the aestheticization of terrorism blurs these two opposing virtualites.

Image still from a jihadi video shot in FPS style. The camera zooms and slows down as the vehicle approaches.

While the distinction of the empirical consequences of terrorism and gaming is obvious, I would like to argue that the process of aestheticization does not merely problematize our own position as sources of aesthetic languages. More significantly, it places the symbolic meaning of terroristic images within the realm of aesthetics, rather than the Real. In the case of terroristic videos, we are not quite watching the Real: it is too performative, too reliant on videogame language. For instance, jihadists sometimes succeed in capturing their own death on screen. A loud pop is heard accompanied by the camera suddenly spinning, and coming to a final rest on the ground. While the empirical death of the author is apparent, their symbolic death is

circumspect. Perhaps as Barthes would have it, in his symbolic death he is rendered dead by the frame that steals his life from him in the act of representation. Perhaps the repeated playing of these videos is the eternal return of the dead, of the living martyr, where martyrdom is a performative condition (Birrell, 2006, p. 34). Or perhaps, like in gaming, the endless replaying of these videos becomes the endless spawning of gamers, rather than the holy immortality of a would-be martyr. If gaming provides a visual realm to escape away from the Real, these terroristic images must also turn away; both bridged by their common language of aesthetics. The Real battlefield of Junger is now withdrawn back to the framed screen.

Recreating a phone-detonated car bombing online. Image still: Aim Down Sights (2018)

The aesthetic and performative aspects of terroristic images and footage is not only limited to these FPS videos. Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué's *Three Posters: A Performative Video* (2000) takes up suicide-bomber Jamal Satti's martyr video, playing his three attempts to deliver his scripted final message. While only one version was meant to be seen by the public, all three attempts in their minute differences can be seen in the artists' work. Khoury and Mroué understand this as a performance like an actor preparing for a role. Once again, martyrdom becomes a performative condition, or as Ross Birrell argues, "all suicide-bombers explode three times: in the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real" (Birrell, 2006, p. 38). Sean Snyder's detailed study of image resolution sizes of footage produced by Al Qaida concludes that in many cases that the semblance of the Real is quite intentional and manufactured (Snyder, 2009). Al Qaida's intentional downgrading of video quality through compression coupled with the typical shaky handheld camera style is consciously performed by their authors to align their films with a visual language that signifies the Real for us. The handheld footage, already reinforced as 'authentic' through our media, signifies real presence. Jordan Crandall writes that the media, through its history of portraying 'real feelings' and 'real people' has laid the groundwork, or *mise-en-scène*, that has allowed terrorist videos to constitute a language that signifies the Real, and allows us to identify with the image. "Authenticity now arises less from the authenticity of reality than the authenticity of the means by which reality is portrayed" (Crandall, 2004, p.71).

Iconophiles and Iconoclasm

That we can speak about an appeal to an aesthetic language and the visual framing of authenticity opens terroristic images to the same critique of representation and scepticisms with which we treat any other image. In *The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights*, Boris Groys identifies terrorism as an extremely iconophilic practice (Groys, 2007). However, the functional power of these images (as mediating icons between martyrs or holy war) falls away as they find their status among the Western world of autonomous image-objects (Groys, 2007, p. 114). Groys argues that these images of the purported Real (or 'super-images' in his language) are on the surface understood as such for their ability to penetrate our subconscious, their enduring strength in our imagination, and their iconic treatment. For him, it is the role of the art world to give equal treatment to these images and to render them "mere art" (Groys, 2007 p. 114), not unlike the holy relics of the non-Western world that found their way into our museums in the 19th Century. This equality among images emerges out of the 20th Century avant-gardist movement that successfully fought for the equal treatment of all visual forms within the visual arts. The symbolic power of the art institution or museum is in its (unintentional) iconoclastic power to render religious and holy icons mere images through their exhibition. The terroristic image is no longer terrorism incarnate in the image but a referential depiction. Groys crucial point is that "the most terrifying, sublime image of violence is still merely an image. An image of terror is produced, staged – and can be aesthetically analyzed and criticized in terms of critique of representation" (Groys, 2006, p. 102). To this end, we must remember that aesthetics is not only found in art and to speak of aesthetics in terrorism or even art in terrorism recognizes both as neutral categories.

Furthermore, makers of terroristic media are compromised in how they depict their actions given that these images are always filtered and presented to us through the mechanisms of popular media. They must necessarily fit the established visual repertoire of popular media that is concerned with communicating quickly with their audience. The makers of these videos must be conscious in their staging of videos, whether religious proclamations, beheadings or battleground footage[2]. One of the most confounding aspects of the Jihadi John videos is that the recorded beheadings were staged. The real beheadings took place off screen, as if the filmmakers were concerned about providing a safe-for-TV video. With the staging of an execution, the audience is brought to examine the performative and cinematic qualities of the footage. The most recent propaganda footage from ISIS has all the appearance of capturing an objective reality but is carefully crafted into an edge-of-your-seats action flick. Their highly cinematic videos (which notably make little to no mention of religion) trade the grainy handheld video quality that signified the Real for highly cinematic professional shots that borrow heavily from our own cultural language. During one execution, a camera close-up of the pistol shows a slow-motion of the recoil. Bullet cartridges glide through the air in 1080p and the dead are nowhere to be seen. No doubt they understood that in order to appeal to us the semblance of the Real had to concede to our total mediation of reality through popular media images[3]. Through their incessant repetition, these images circulated by the media are bestowed a symbolic value "subject to art criticism like every other image." (Groys, 2006, p. 102). It is worth quoting Groys at length here:

---

[2] In the film *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images* (2011), Eric Baudelaire interviews filmmaker-turned-terrorist Masao Adachi who equates the staging of films to the staging of terrorism, both in their planning and execution.
[3] The bridge between both worlds became complete when ISIS began to release their own videogames as online recruitment tools.

'Aestheticization functions here not as a nobilization but as a critical relativization of this act of terror, which presents itself not as an artistic but as a sacral act in the context of the holy war. And to compare a holy icon to an artwork means to commit blasphemy - not to praise it...The mere application of the notion of art to these quasi-sacral images is already an act of critique of them because it subjects them to the same criteria of evaluation that are valid for any other, "secular" artistic image' (Groys, 2006, p. 105).

These images of the political sublime are understood as such because of their direct appeal to our desire for the Real. In turn, the constant replaying of these images in our society is a delayed (but not resolved) satisfaction for the Real.

In this cinematic shot from ISIS a propaganda video the semblance of the Real gives in to a Hollywood aesthetic.

Conclusion

Our consumption of terroristic images has changed substantially a decade after the writings of Žižek and Groys. The images have moved beyond the semblance of the Real, or the political sublime, to become popular entertainment. Jihadi John circulates the internet as a meme now. The blade of his knife no longer threatens to break the screen, if it ever did. In *Aim Down Sights* I select images and sequences from videogames that are similar to media representations of terror; the former reaffirms our aesthetic understanding of the latter. In videogame images, however, the terrorist as (co)author has been removed entirely and we are left with game designers and gamers recreating the 21st Century's neurotic fantasy of terror in what Umberto Eco calls a *Hyperreality*. This places them in a highly compromised position. Videogames become a liminal state of complicity between a detached spectatorship of hyper-real aesthetics and a subjective experience of the semblance of the Real. The resulting tension is even more palpable in the extreme complicity between the practice of drone warfare as removed spectatorship and an active hand-of-God intervention into the Real. As we move deeper into virtual aesthetic representation (through virtual and augmented reality) and subjective experience (immersion, connectivity, participation) we are bringing about a unique moment in historical iconography. We are all extreme iconophiles (not unlike terrorists) hoping to revive the Real through the image as icon, albeit impossibly through entertainment. Like religious icons that act as mediators our virtual worlds of aesthetics become the new mediators. Nevertheless, these images can and should be understood no

differently than the terroristic image subject to aesthetic criticism. As Arnoud Holleman states, reality is not automatically represented by the images we make of it. Instead, the mystery or complexity of that reality is lost when an image is thought to represent or replace it. (Holleman, 2009). The images produced by terrorism, and the virtual worlds of terror we create are the blackest of frames through which we create a semblance. Its spectacle is so grand that, as Groys says, it is hard for even artists to compete as image makers. The role of the artist and the art institution is now essential in challenging the images in which we immerse ourselves, and affirming the image as a source of the symbolic rather than the Real.

REFERENCES

Bataille, G. (1991) *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume 1 Consumption.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone, 1991.

Birrell, R. (2006) The Gift of Terror: Suicide-Bombing as Potlatch. In: Hlavajova M and Winder J (eds) Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art. Utrecht: BAK, 92-107.

Crandall, J. (2004) Unmanned. In: Marilouise A, Marilouise K (eds) Life in the Wires: The CTheory Reader. New York: New Worlds Perspective Books, 109-125.

Groys, B. (2006) *The Fate of Art in The Age of Terror*. In: Hlavajova M and Winder J (eds) Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art. Utrecht: BAK, 92-107.

Groys, B (2007) *The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights*. In: BAVO (eds) Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-Identification. Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 108-119.

Holleman, A. (2009) *On ne touché pas—On Copyright and Iconoclasm.* In: Hlavajova, M., Lutticken, S., Winder, J. (eds) The Return of the Religion and other Myths: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art. Utrecht: BAK.

Mroue, R. (2012) *The Pixelated Revolution* [video installation]. Documenta 1, Kassel.

Rehak, B. (2003) Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the avatar. In: Mark BP, Wolf JP (eds) The Video Game Theory Reader. New York: Routledge, 103–127.

Schulzke, M (2013). Being a terrorist: Video Game Simulations of the Other Side of the War on Terror. In: *Media, War and Conflict*, 6(3), 207–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213494129

Snyder, S (2009) *Marriott Hotel Islamabad*. In: Bouwhuis J, Ommandeur I, Frieling G, Ruyters D, Schavemaker M, Vesters C (eds) Now is the Time. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 51-58

Žižek, S (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. New York: Verso.