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Uncertainty in the Study of Terrorism

In 1927, Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle changed what it means to do science and to think scientifically. He posited that certain relational concepts cannot be accurately and precisely measured at the same time (Heisenberg, 1927). One cannot, for example, accurately measure the velocity and precise location of a thing or an object simultaneously. Velocity assumes movement. Location assumes that things stay still long enough for them to be understood. We can easily re-appropriate this idea for the purposes of social scientific, political and cultural thought and ask ourselves as we think and do research: is the thing that we are trying to understand remaining still long enough for it to be understood well or at all?

Terrorism studies scholar Magnus Ranstorp believes that contemporary terrorism studies sits at a crossroads and may well be in crisis. A field that was once described as an ‘invisible college’ of academics and professionals spread across university departments, private research centres and government departments became suddenly mainstream in the aftermath of the most significant development in the field, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (known almost universally as ‘9/11’) (Ranstorp, 2009: 14). This ‘handful’ of pre-9/11 terrorism scholars worked on interpreting ‘immediate events’, ‘making sense of evolving trends’ and ‘predicting’ what was coming (Ranstorp, 2009: 13). Its increasingly multi-disciplinary nature – a trend that is more apparent after 9/11, but was certainly true before 9/11 as well – was seen by many to be an advantage, but it also left the field open to charges of a lack of ‘rigor… theory, data and methods’ (Stampnitzky in Ranstorp, 2009: 13).

Ranstorp (2009: 14) sympathises with Stampnitsky’s stance and argues that terrorism studies lacks reflexivity and sophistication in theory
and method, and suffers from a ‘relative absence of debate’ amongst entrenched terrorism studies academics.

Often disparate evidence is woven together selectively to suit the case without regard for specific contexts. Relying on each others’ work alongside government and media reports produced an ever-expanding intellectual quilt that had a tendency to grow in size, but less in layered intellectual depth. The same mantras or analogies… appeared across the terrorism studies literature without anyone ever critically questioning what it really meant and the social scientific basis or qualitative/quantitative method for getting to this conclusion.

(Ranstorp, 2009: 14)

Schmid and Jongman (1988: 177) had already identified similar problems when they argued that terrorism studies was often ‘impressionistic, superficial, and… pretentious’, and relied ‘on far-reaching generalizations’ of evidence and data that often informed only specific contexts whilst claiming to inform broad or generalisable conditions.

These might be charges levelled at any academic field but they seem particularly evident in terrorism studies. It has been a field colonised as much by terror academics as by journalists, quasi-experts and self-appointed specialists (see Howie, 2011: 72–75). Yet, whilst the contributions are diverse, debates within the field have been traditionally lacking.

A debate on methodologies in terrorism research recently broke out between two heavy hitters: Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman. Where some see division, Ranstorp (2009: 16–17) rightly sees progress. Debates and disagreements between academics are beneficial and positive because they create uncertainty. Uncertainty is the life force of scholarship and thought. Without uncertainty, scholarship is unnecessary or worse – a redundancy.

Uncertainty is foundational to thinking about terrorism and political violence, terrorists and their supporters and those that witness terrorist violence – the living audiences that are the terrorist’s primary target. Terrorism sparks uncertainty, ambivalence and odd debates about whether one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.

This uncertainty has stretched across multiple configurations of time and space. From the early days of contemporary terrorism scholarship in the 1970s through to the excesses of 9/11 and the post-9/11 world, and then to the multi-disciplinary accounts that have recently gathered
under the label of critical studies on terrorism, the word ‘terrorism’ has divided opinion, helped spectacularise media spaces and sparked furious and vitriolic debates. Through acts of violence carried out in the name of ‘counterterrorism’, it has also created generations of future terrorists ready to once again make witnesses of those who are watching their televisions or computer screens when terrorists strike. Few have been immune to the meanings and consequences of terrorism in the twenty-first century. Many millions witnessed 9/11 live and direct from New York City, Washington DC, and a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Many millions were also watching as the ‘War on Terror’ was launched with invasions of Afghanistan (where al Qaeda enjoyed a safe haven) and Iraq (the reasons for which remain only partially understood) (see Silberstein, 2002; Paust, 2003–2004; Klein, 2005; Faludi, 2008).

The consequences of terrorism extend far beyond this of course. The economy changed after 9/11, with some industry sectors more affected than others (although certain dire warnings such as ‘people will never work in tall buildings again’ have not eventuated; see Kunstler & Salingaros, 2001; Savitch, 2003). Tourism, the insurance industry and financial and economic markets were badly affected initially (Alexander & Alexander, 2002; Makinen, 2002; Alexander, 2004; Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008). The connections between the 9/11 attacks and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 are perhaps still open for discussion. There were simpler, more direct consequences. Racism and fear became an everyday feature of life for many Muslims and people who had the appearance of Muslims living in Western countries (Howie, 2009a; Aly & Green, 2010). Our popular culture changed too (Melnick, 2009; Howie, 2011). Our favourite television shows such as Friends, Sex and the City, The West Wing and Angel were suddenly post-9/11 television. They changed, sometimes only subtly, as the world changed. Other television programmes emerged in direct response to 9/11. Programmes such as 24 and the reimagined Battlestar Galactica were attempts to confront the post-9/11 world and engage with its consequences. Programmes such as The Big Bang Theory, How I Met Your Mother and True Blood were less direct, but, nonetheless, forced a confrontation with continuing life in post-9/11 uncertainty, in a world that ‘didn’t blow up’ (Bays in Callaghan, 2009).

But everything I have said so far only scratches the surface. I have not even mentioned further acts of terrorism that continued to occur across the world from Bali to London to Madrid to Mumbai to Oslo to Malaysia to Thailand to Pakistan and to a host of other places. But I intend on
doing a little more than scratch the surface in this book. And whilst I cannot guarantee too much certainty or promise to measure the velocity and location of terrorism simultaneously, I can offer a series of stories that illuminate what it means to live and work in a time of terror. I can demonstrate that terrorists want publicity and a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead. I can show you that understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism means understanding what it is to witness terrorist violence and counterterrorism reprisals. It is the story of what it means to be witnesses to terror.

What is critique? How to stand on the wrong building

‘Critique’, according to Butler (2002: 212), ‘is always a critique of some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution’. It is a practice that loses its appeal the moment it becomes ‘abstracted’ – when it begins to ‘stand alone’ as a philosophy in its own right, when it is transformed into a generalisation. But this should not mean that critique cannot sometimes take the form of a generalisation or something situated and specific. What we should avoid, perhaps, in critiquing is mere ‘fault finding’ (Williams, 1976: 75–76). What we need, in Butler’s (2002: 212) words, is a ‘vocabulary’ for doing critique as a way of establishing ‘the kinds of responses we have’ at our disposal that will not result in unsituated judgement. Judgement is not critique. Critique emerges when we suspend judgement and fight the seduction of standing in judgement. Critique is a ‘practice of values’ based on such a suspension. Judgement is about power. Critique is about revealing the ‘constellations of power’ that sustain judgements (Adorno, 1984: 30).

How then can we offer a critique without transforming it into judgement? We can do this by problematising, disrupting, offering some kind of unexpected, surprising, untimely account (Rabinow, 2009; Kelly, 2011). Critique is untimely when it disrupts established and often unquestioned versions of truth or reality. Untimely things might make us feel uncomfortable, uneasy, ‘uncalm’. If undertaken effectively – without pretence or arrogance, and without judgement – untimeliness is necessary. It can illuminate that which had not seemed very important to us before and, in doing so, remind us of what we may be ignoring or forgetting.

I often describe the sort of work that I do in the interconnected fields of terrorism studies, the political sciences, sociology and cultural studies as untimely. As a way of describing the types of critique that I attempt, I sometimes deploy the metaphor of standing on the wrong building.
The origins of this metaphor can be found in a scenario involving a pre-9/11 terrorist threat and a popular television show about government conspiracies, alien invasions and sinister networks of fiends and allies known as The X Files. More precisely, I draw this metaphor from the first X Files movie (subtitled Fight the Future) (Howie, 2011: 3–4). In one of the film’s opening scenes FBI agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder find themselves standing atop a tall, inner-city building in Dallas. They are looking for an explosive device after a bomb threat is ‘called in’ to the FBI. They look towards the top of another skyscraper across the street. It is a federal building swarming with agents with bomb-detection equipment, experts and specialists of all kinds who are searching for evidence of the explosive device that is supposed to be there. The building across the street from Mulder and Scully is the building against which the bomb threat has been made. Mulder and Scully choose to stand on the wrong building, a building across the street. They can still see the right building, but it is not the focus of their attention. They are following a ‘hunch’:

Scully: Mulder, when a terrorist bomb threat is called in, the rational purpose of providing that information is to allow us to find the bomb. The rational object of terrorism is to promote terror. If you’d study the statistics, you’d find the model behavioral pattern for virtually every case where a threat has turned up an explosive device; and if we don’t act in accordance with that data, if you ignore it as we have done, the chances are great that if there actually is a bomb, we might not find it. Lives could be lost …

Mulder: Whatever happened to playing a hunch, Scully? The element of surprise? Random acts of unpredictability? If we fail to anticipate the unforeseen or expect the unexpected in a universe of infinite possibilities, we may find ourselves at the mercy of anyone or anything that cannot be programmed, categorized or easily referenced. (Carter & Spotnitz, 1998)

They are attempting to predict the unpredictable, anticipate something surprising. They feel free to do so because, as Mulder elegantly puts it, the other building does not need them. Other people have that building covered. I don’t need to be working on some of the more popular or well-known fields in the study of terrorism such as radicalisation, the psychology of terrorists, the functionalities of terrorist organisations, the way terrorists use the Internet, the preparedness of the emergency
services, the effectiveness of military strategies for combating terrorism and a host of other possibilities. My colleagues – the many thousands of skilled and dedicated terrorism scholars from all over the world – appear to have that covered. I want to continue to use this metaphor that I first introduced in *Terror on the Screen* (2011) and expand it further. *Standing on the wrong building* is an important trope indicating parallax perceptions, alternative realities and a willingness to confront things that cannot be easily categorised, programmed, or referenced.

The research that was conducted for this book is of the kind identified by Ranstorp (2009: 32) as ‘public reactions to terrorism’. Most terrorism studies academics explore the roots of terrorism, terrorist organisations, law enforcement models, medical responses, biological warfare, strategic studies and a host of other fields. I study terrorism’s witnesses. It is a field I have been working in for some time as a post-9/11 terrorism scholar. Rarely is this ‘public reaction’ as important as it is in the world’s major cities. The contemporary city is a theatre for terrorism and is a place where distance is often of little comfort for those forced to witness global terrorist violence from post-9/11 locations. Social theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1995) has argued that the city is more than a place where people live, work and play. People and the cities they inhabit are intertwined and connected in powerful ways: ‘The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies’ (Grosz, 1995: 104).

I am reminded here of Hélène Cixous’ (1997: 307) haunting description of the city: ‘When we are alive we do not know we are ghosts. What are we in the promised cities? The contemporary dead of our descendants, the future returning ghosts.’ Cixous’ spectral monsters seem to be an apt metaphor for understanding post-9/11 terrorism. Cities are spaces where people flock to benefit from an expanded array of economic, social, cultural and interpersonal opportunities. It is the home of the affluent middle classes. It is also the home of the criminal and the terrorist (see Howie, 2009a). As Virilio (2002a: 82) controversially suggests, ‘The destruction wrought on the Pentagon was of little consequence; what exploded in people’s minds was the World Trade Center.’ The Towers were symbols of the hegemony of the city’s denizens’ lifestyle. When they fell to the streets of Lower Manhattan the fantasies of security that we all must hold in order to live our lives amongst other people were seriously damaged. Only time will tell if our efforts to imagine a more secure city will make us feel safer too.

Security, according to de Muynck (2004: 8), is deeply embedded in the Western psyche. ‘There can be no doubt’, de Muynck argues,
'that within the contemporary Western condition, fear is the driving force behind the (re)organization of public and private space.' Our attempts to expel fear, dread and anxiety from city spaces can often be seen out in the open – security guards; swipe-card access systems and security doors; surveillance technologies that include closed-circuit television networks linked directly to policing and security organisations; risk management strategising; and fortress-oriented architectural changes in everything from building and street-corner design to protective concrete bollards in front of major buildings that are beautified with plant and floral arrangements. We should not be surprised to learn that

When the French built ‘maximum security cell-blocks’, they used the magnetized doorways that airports had had for years. Paradoxically, the equipment that ensured maximal freedom in travel formed part of the core of penitentiary incarceration. At the same time, in a number of residential areas in the United States, security was maintained exclusively through closed-circuit television hook-ups with a central police station. In banks, in supermarkets, and on major highways.

(Virilio, 2002b: 381–382)

De Muynck (2004: 10) believes that what we rely upon most to feel safe and secure in city spaces is ‘prosthetic elements’ that we use to lessen our anxieties and keep ‘chance at bay’. Security may often represent our best efforts at securing the unsecurable. But security, by its nature, is never completely secure. Security is never certain, but believing it is certain makes us feel better. This seems to be a reasonable response to a threat like terrorism. After all, terror is an emotion, a feeling, a state of mind. But being obsessed with security is leaving visible and social traces. Suspicion, hostility and angst have become commonplace in the world’s cities after 9/11. Research that I conducted and report on in this book suggests that perhaps time is having a healing effect, but the consequences of terrorism certainly remain. Where once tall buildings symbolically represented strength, even hegemony and power, they now are viewed by some as representing ‘impotence and fear’ (Küng, 2004: 888). The same things that make cities strong also make them weak. As Bauman (2005: 73) argues: ‘We may say that the sources of danger have moved into the heart of the city. Friends, enemies and above all the elusive and mysterious strangers veering threateningly between the two extremes, now mix and rub shoulders on the city streets.’ Our battles and confrontations with our terrors, fears and anxieties take place
in city spaces, inside city walls. And new walls are forged wherever they will stand:

Heavily armoured trenches and bunkers intended to separate out strangers, keep them away and bar their entry are fast becoming the most visible aspects of contemporary cities – though they take many forms and . . . their designers try hard to blend their creations into the cityscape, thereby ‘normalizing’ the state of emergency in which the safety-addicted urban residents dwell.

(Bauman, 2005: 73)

The September 11 attacks, according to Žižek (2009a: 3), ‘heralded an era in which new walls were seen emerging everywhere: between Israel and the West Bank, around the European Union, along the US–Mexico border, but also within nation-states themselves’. In particular, gated communities enjoy renewed significance in the post-9/11 world: entire American suburbs behind walls; heliports serving the penthouse classes in some of the world’s most dangerous cities; and travelling through heavy gates in SUVs to work in skyscrapers in some of the largest and wealthiest cities on the planet. It represents, perhaps, an obsession with security (Žižek, 2009a: 4–5). But on a globalised planet ‘security cannot be gained, let alone reliably assured’.

Our fear, our terror, has had many meanings and consequences. New walls. New forms of apartheid. A transformation of public and private space. New categories of strangers. These are among the most pressing consequences of terrorism. This is how 9/11 changed how we think about ourselves and others and changed how we live our lives.

The situation and its stories

Israelis have used the word hamatzav to describe a variety of things – ‘everything from the Intifada to the security fence and the withdrawal from Gaza’ (Žižek, 2010: 56). Hamatzav is ‘The Situation’. It is a word that once was innocuously used but has come to be associated with the conflict with the Palestinians. But Žižek notes that hamatzav does not refer to specific situations, but rather to every situation. ‘It bleeds’, Žižek (2010: 56) argues, ‘into every part of life.’ I am tempted to draw a long bow and suggest that terrorist events work this way too, of which 9/11 is a powerful example. 9/11, one might say, is ‘The Situation’ of the post-9/11 world. It has been evoked to explain the course of war and political events; the social and cultural make-ups of societies and who should be
permitted to enter; the way we structure vulnerable places such as cities, major events and workplaces; and how we go about our working lives in these potentially vulnerable surroundings. But most importantly, terrorism has invaded our ‘private passions and obsessions’. So many aspects of the post-9/11 world can be seen to evoke 9/11 as ‘their absent Real-Cause’ (Žižek, 2010: 56).

Emerging from 9/11 and the spaces that it has created are stories in a variety of forms. Some of these stories we know quite well. Embedded journalists have beamed into our television and computer screens images of war, invasion and terrorism. These have been predominantly the stories of our soldiers and their plight, and their challenges and the difficulties faced by their families. But they are not the only stories that are told. We have heard the stories of young Iraqi women going about their lives in a war-torn nation, a place where going to classes at school or going shopping can be a death-defying act. Their stories have arrived via social networking websites – on this occasion, spaces that make up what is sometimes described as the blogosphere:

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi civilians of various religious, ethnic, tribal, social and economic identities have witnessed their country descend into profound and often deadly chaos. In the industrialised, liberal democracies of the West – some of which have been members of the so-called Coalition of the Willing – a variety of technologies (television, print, www) have provided a window into this chaos.

(Campbell & Kelly, 2009: 21)

Whatever our mediated experiences of events in Iraq are, they remain mediated. We are necessarily ‘abstracted’ from the suffering of people in war zones as we also often are from those who suffer when terrorists strike (Campbell & Kelly, 2009: 22). Our everyday hope is that terrorism will remain an abstraction and never suddenly become immediate, up close and personal.

Feminist social theorist Zillah Eisenstein (2007: xvii) has also been paying attention to these Iraqi women’s stories. One Iraqi blogger, Riverbend, describes the ‘dreariness of the everyday life in war’. Her blog contains stories about not having enough water or electricity, ‘unrelenting heat’ and after-dark raids by soldiers – which meant many people went to bed still wearing clothes – as well as the ironic shortage in petrol and its exorbitant costs. In short, Riverbend writes about a ‘daily life that doesn’t happen, the daily routines that no longer exist’
(Eisenstein, 2007: xvii). War, for Eisenstein, is more than death and destruction: ‘It is about living a life that isn’t worth living.’

Campbell and Kelly (2009: 22) suggest that a useful point of reference for their analysis of Iraqi women’s blogs is Anne Frank’s diaries, penned in hiding during WWII. This connection suggests something significant about traumatic events. It suggests that events need to be witnessed to have an impact because they need to be witnessed for us to know and to experience the consequences.

But perhaps it is not enough for these tales to be simply heard, or to be made known and witnessed. Perhaps they need to be witnessed in particular ways and in particular situations so that the knowledges that are gained from witnessing are situated (Haraway, 1991: 183–191). Knowledge that is situated connects itself to particular people in particular locations across multiple configurations of time and space. Situated knowledge holds that things that can be objectively known are only ever known partially (Haraway, 1991: 190). Partial perspectives are about accepting what we can know in particular contexts and what we cannot. When we commit to the limits of our senses and accept these limitations we can bear witness to events and everyday life with honesty. Partial perspectives allow us to describe the view from the wrong building. Partial perspectives can be uncertain, even monstrous. Their monstrous potential is among the subjects of Chapter 6, where I describe how we should live with vampires in a post-9/11 world.

**Situated knowledges of terrorism**

Ranstorp (2009: 14) laments the lack of sophistication of some of the terrorism studies literature that recycles empirical stories uncritically, unreflexively compares ‘interchanged contexts’ and conducts research ‘without sufficient regard for situational, political, social or security specificity’. What Ranstorp laments is the lack of situated knowledges in terrorism research. This is not the first time that this call has been heard in mainstream terrorism studies. Martha Crenshaw (2000: 405) argued before 9/11 that terrorism researchers needed to avoid simplifications in relating ‘categories of terrorist actors’ and avoid vague and unreliable generalisations that resulted in the grouping together of unrelated events, perpetrators, situations, cities and contexts.

So I too move towards situated knowledges. But situatedness is not another word for certainty. Whilst thinking about situated knowledges – research accounts that allow for context, situation and embodiment to be part of the story – may be a step towards a more objective account
of terrorism (Haraway, 1991: 183–184), uncertainty remains since the ‘important practice of credible witnessing is still at stake’ (Haraway, 1997: 33). Uncertainty in talk of terror is deeply embedded in the discursive spaces in which discussions about terrorism occur. This dilemma of language in the study of terrorism is not new, but I intend to drive this discussion in a different direction. I hope to show that language problems in discussing terrorism do not need to be, and should not be, overcome. Instead, these language problems need to be understood as part of what makes terrorism terrifying and part of its power to attract large and diverse audiences of witnesses. A failure of language, I argue, is always part of terrorism discussions.

**Tautologies of terror**

The problems of language in discussions of terrorism can be explored further with the psychoanalytic insights of Slavoj Žižek (something I do more than once in this book). For Žižek (2010: 68), the linguistic turn known as a ‘tautology’ neatly captures the meaning of what psychoanalysts refer to as objet petit a – little objects of desire. Tautologies represent linguistic redundancies and even frustrations with the limits of speech, writing and the general use of words to describe our complex emotions and life-worlds. Language, in this view, is used to transform uncertainties out there into speech acts and forms that act as vicarious reality agreements between people. Through our use of language we can never be completely certain that we are transferring the meanings we intend, but we can, perhaps, get close enough to achieve general understanding. In this pursuit, however, things may not always go to plan. For example, the phrase ‘boys will be boys’ is designed to capture something essential – authentic – about the forms that youthful masculinities take. It represents those unspoken truths that we all come close to understanding but can never adequately phrase. ‘Boys will be boys’ refers to something indefinable about ‘boys’, something that other speech acts don’t quite capture. Without reference to itself, in a type of circular linguistic logic, we lose meaning. The absurd repetitiveness of the phrase ‘boys will be boys’ is, precisely, what gives it its meaning. Boys behave in the ways that boys do. You know what I mean. Tautologies represent our limits of speech and limits of thinking. They represent the essence of existential nothingness – the proverbial void. They are Kierkegaard’s (1944) ‘concept of dread’ and its possibility of freedom.

When we are asked to clarify what we mean when we use a tautology we invariably respond with various reassertions, change-ups
What I mean is boys often act aggressively, in unfeminine ways. They can be violent, loud and stubborn. When the tautology fails to please we move to unsatisfactory approximations. We offer words that are like what we want to say, but words that, nevertheless, do not quite describe things in the way we want. We restate our tautologies so that they make sense, but it is a sense-making that compromises what we want to say. By undermining tautological meaning we undermine our little objects of desire – what we know, what we are trying to say.

The problem with this process is that, according to Žižek (2010: 69), when we eliminate linguistic redundancies we do not experience a gain of something like knowledge or wisdom. We experience a loss – a loss of meaning. We traverse the void that the tautology created – we make it disappear. We perform a speech act that makes our uncertainty appear to vanish. Rendering the uncertain into tangible language makes us feel better, but making the appearance of uncertainty vanish does little to help us deal with our indescribable uncertainties, anxieties and fears. Or, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, we learn to traverse the fantasy so we can remain in reality and avoid the traumatic confrontation with the horrors and obscenities of an ambivalent world.

Terrorism works this way for witnesses. If there was one way to describe the outcomes of the research that I have conducted for this book, I would say that terrorism causes people to feel terror. Terror is the name we give to the uncertainty we feel in the face of global violence that has appeared not just in war zones but in the heart of civilisation in some of the world’s most populous cities. If terrorism does not cause terror, then it is not terrorism. It is violence, perhaps, or something else. Not terrorism. The absurd, ironic turn of phrase terrorising terrorism is thus more informative than it may first appear to be. It is an example of when the ‘signifier falls into the signified’, where it is not enough to say that terrorism causes fear, anxiety, dread and terror. One has to add that terrorism causes fear, anxiety, dread and terror precisely because it is terrorism (Žižek, 2010: 68). It is, in a way, a self-fulfilling prophecy – we call the things that terrify us terrorism. The ‘mysterious ingredient’ that makes witnesses respond to terrorism in this way is ineffable – the je ne sais quoi which cannot be adequately translated into any explicit positive determinations, whose transcendence only shines through the flow of speech – is… totally immanent to language, the product of a signifying reversal or self-relation…. The paradox is thus that language reaches ‘beyond itself’, to the reality of
objects and processes in the world, when it designates these objects and proceeds by means of clear denotative/discursive meanings; but when it refers to an ineffable transcendent X ‘beyond words’, it is caught in itself.

‘It is caught in itself’. Experiencing terrorism makes witnesses feel terror. This is an ideal metaphor for the arguments that appear in the chapters that follow.

Vision, hinterlands, method assemblages: researching the witnesses of terrorism

Vision, and its ‘persistence’ (Haraway, 1989: 1; 1991: 188), is a central dilemma that I grapple with in this book. Vision in the human world is what most matters when we bear witness and when we describe what we have seen. It is the sense we most rely on to gain access to the always present media spectacle that has characterised how we have come to learn about 9/11 and the post-9/11 world. Haraway (1991: 188) insists ‘on the embodied nature of all vision’. Vision is something that people are part of. Cameras and the media do not see – they mediate. They are go-betweens. For this reason the visual metaphor of the spectacle has been a particularly prominent way of describing the meanings and consequences of terrorism (Chaliand, 1987; Kirkland, 2003; Kellner, 2005; Boggs & Pollard, 2006; Giroux, 2006).

Witnessing is another visual metaphor, and I intend to deploy it with my eyes firmly open. Witnessing does not imply mediation, although this may be part of the picture. I do not want my witnessing, and the witnessing of the people and situations that are featured in this book, to be an all-conquering ‘gaze from nowhere’ (Haraway, 1991: 188). It is an embodied, situated, contextualised gaze that emerges from some specific locations – the dogmatic confines of contemporary and not so contemporary terrorism studies; the literature that explores the relationships between terrorists, terrorism and the media; the revisited stories of post-9/11 workers dwelling in the contemporary city; the tales of elder witnesses to terrorism all with different experiences and diverse stories of living in times and places of terror; a return to the cityscape to encounter some monstrous possibilities and to learn how to live with vampires; to the front lines of security in the effort to counter violent extremism (née, the global war on terror); and, of course, Lower Manhattan where it feels as though all this began.
I describe the conditions for researching and understanding these contexts, situations and embodied encounters with John Law’s metaphor of method assemblages and his accounts of what it means to navigate the hinterlands of (social) science research. Research methods do not ‘discover’ or even ‘depict’ realities (Law, 2004: 45). There is a reasonable chance that they have never performed this role. According to Law, research methods and methodologies ‘participate in the enactment of those realities’. Methods and methodologies are more than a series or a set of procedures, philosophies and practices; they are a ‘bundled hinterland’ of ‘ramifying and indefinite set[s] of relations, places and assumptions that disappear from view’ in the course of conducting research. To understand these bundles and relations we need a ‘method assemblage’ (122) that enables us to enact and craft – or, in Haraway’s (2000) terms, tie useful and promising knots – realities in here from realities that are out there (Law, 2004: 23–25). I am also influenced by Catherine Kohler Reissman’s (1993) accounts of doing narrative analysis. For Reissman (1993: 1) ‘story telling’ is what researchers and research respondents do. We ‘create order’ and ‘construct texts’ in the co-constructive space of interviewing, interpreting literatures, or cultural happenings – ‘human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narrativization’ (Reissman, 1993: 2).

As such, in the chapters that follow I will provide a particular reading of the terrorism studies literature and the literature on terrorism and the media to explore the roles that witnesses have played in understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism; report on social research that was conducted with witnesses to terrorism in 2012; explore ways of living with vampires and what it means to be a corporate citizen after 9/11; understand the roles that security guards play on the front line of the counterterrorism effort; and catch a glimpse of life in Lower Manhattan, once known as a cosmopolitan and liberal haven, now a terrorist target.

In Chapter 2 I offer a reading of the literatures in which narratives of terrorism witnessing are explored. With this reading I offer an account of terrorism that emphasises its meanings and consequences for witnesses. Witnesses are the terrorists’ targets of choice. This is the nature of terrorism, and this is how it has consequences for people both near and far from where terrorism occurs. Terrorism is designed for the living, not those who die in an attack. This is not something that is widely acknowledged nor is it necessarily polite to draw attention to it. It is my contention that the best accounts of terrorism are reflexive of the fact
that terrorism is often explained best as a tautology – terrorism causes terror. If violence does not cause terror then it is not terrorism.

In Chapter 3 I build on this reading of terrorism studies and the witnessing literature and extend it to the literature that explores the relationships between terrorism and the media. This is a field of inquiry that is populated by traditional terrorism studies scholars and, more recently, by critical scholars from diverse academic fields that include cultural and social theory, the social sciences more generally, communication and media studies and philosophy. I explore the narratives of witnessing that have emerged from these literatures and I follow them into Internet and social networking spaces. In these spaces traditional and critical/theoretical accounts of terrorism and the media converge. It provides, I argue, great hope for more unified approaches to tackling the significant problems associated with terrorism’s presence, representation and depiction in various media.

I am tempted to call Chapters 4–8 case studies of terrorism witnessing. But I prefer to describe these chapters as stories of witnessing terrorism. These stories are witnesses’ accounts of terrorism, and the 9/11 and post-9/11 world. They are diverse, ambivalent and sometimes surprising and unexpected.

Chapter 4 features stories of witnessing revisited. I report on interviews that I conducted in 2011 and early 2012 with respondents from my first terrorism research project that I conducted in 2005. The three respondents that feature in this chapter have worked in major Australian cities in a post-9/11 world. When I spoke to them in 2005 they all expressed feelings of anxiety and dread associated with living in the uncertain precariousness of a major city after 9/11. In 2011, much has changed, yet little has changed. Time has provided perspective to these witnesses, but fear and anxiety are still features of their lives in a time of terror. Their fears are not all about terrorism, but their terror remains. Fears of terrorism have been combined with other fears. But this does not mean that their fears of terrorism had disappeared. They had become more routine and more everyday. The accounts of these witnesses are powerful reminders of our fragility and of the challenges of tolerating uncertainty.

Chapter 5 features stories told by a group of witnesses who do not often receive specific attention in literature that explores terrorism, counterterrorism and security. I have described this group (after some conjecture) as elder witnesses. They are terrorism’s older, more mature witnesses. They form part of an age demographic that accounts for
around a third of the population in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, and they are a group on the rise. People over 50 years of age represent a significant population not just because of their numbers and growth but because of their knowledge and experiences. The respondents in Chapter 4 are 30-something professionals. The six respondents featured in Chapter 5 are in their late career or retired and have seen major threats and risks come and go. But they were not immune to strong responses in the face of the terrorist threat. Indeed, it was their ability to contextualise – *situate* – terrorism within certain historical, social and cultural constructs that makes these stories so important.

In Chapter 6 I offer advice on how to live with vampires and other monsters born in a post-9/11 world. We once again find ourselves in the city and in the skyscrapers of the global metropolis. On 9/11 the vampires of the corporate world were met head-on by the vampires of the underprivileged and developing world. One might say that they fought us here in the hope that we would fight them over there. Through a particular reading of the roles of vampiric realities in Western social and cultural life I account for some monstrous possibilities and show how vampires should be part of every effective multicultural society.

Chapter 7 features stories from the perspective of a much maligned and misunderstood group of witnesses to terror – the security guards on the front line of the Global War on Terror (now more fashionably known as *Countering Violent Extremism*) (Ranstorp, 2011). They are a ubiquitous feature of the contemporary city. They are so ubiquitous that we probably rarely take stock of when we are in their presence. They are the easily forgotten *already-responders* of a nation’s counterterrorism strategies. Their stories should be our highest priority since our safety is so often in their hands (regardless of whether we think it is a good or a bad thing).

In Chapter 8 I offer some non-conclusive, and perhaps unsatisfying, conclusions. Concluding tales of terror represents a challenge and I am wary of predictions, overconfidence and attempts to find catharsis. I prefer to think that there is no catharsis. But hope remains. In having hope and promising not to be a vanishing witness I return to Lower Manhattan, where so many believe this story started. I attempt to show that terrorism’s witnesses and their stories can be found in some unlikely places. And, as events in Norway in 2011 have shown, the next era of witnessing may be closer than we expect.
Conclusion: the transformative power of storytelling

Bauman (2006: 17) believes that people living in the West are psychologically scarred by what he describes as the ‘Titanic Syndrome’. This syndrome is a metaphor for the ‘horror’ of potentially falling through the ‘wafer-thin crust’ of civilisation into the icy currents of uncertainty and nothingness. The Titanic story reminds us of our precarious and vulnerable human existence, the fleshiness of our bodies and the threats, risks and dangers that we try not to think about in our day-to-day lives (see Turner, 2006). Bauman (2006: 17) reminds us that the threatening icebergs are ‘silent’, always outside of view, lurking below the surface. When we strike one, it can be devastating. But the horror of the Titanic story should not be understood as deriving from the image of the iceberg. The horrifying image should be something more banal and everyday. The horror of the Titanic story is in the spectacle of the luxurious liner where the catastrophe strikes and has its most powerful consequences. It is within the glamour of the luxury liner that disaster occurs. It is here that people were killed and the affluent comforts of the leisure liner driven to the cold and murky depths of the ocean. The horror is born of the possibility that with little warning the most relaxed and comfortable surroundings can become a dangerous, risky and intolerable place.

Magnus Ranstorp (2011) believes that counterterrorism should be about making people feel better about walking around their precarious and vulnerable cities. Counterterrorism should be about countering feelings of terror, not fighting our fears and anxieties in battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. It should be about holding trauma at bay. Traumatic tales are, according to Žižek (2010: 57), testimony to the ‘transformative power of storytelling’. In the literature that has explored the social and cultural meanings of trauma, priority has been given to the immediate physical and emotional consequences of traumatic events. Among the concerns are the ways that people have lived with physical injury and emotional scarring in the aftermath of disaster, how the sites of trauma are haunted by their traumatic histories, how witnesses to trauma sometimes act out in the face of terror and anxiety and how images of trauma can haunt us and continue to inflict damage and casualties long after the debris has settled (Caruth, 1995; 1996; Alexander et al., 2000; Alexander et al., 2004; Tumarkin, 2005). Traumatic stories are often cathartic. I am interested in the ways that traumatic events such as terrorism are incorporated by witnesses into the social and cultural narratives of their
lives. These narratives are often ambiguous and ambivalent. But more than anything these stories are unpredictable and uncertain, much like trauma itself. As Bauman (2010: 107) argues, ‘The future is unpredictable because it is, purely and simply, undetermined’ (emphasis in original).

In the face of traumatic possible futures Western city dwellers have become anxious. One only needs to turn on the television to be inundated with the latest scientific and pseudo-scientific accounts of the newest, previously unknown, dangers that are delivered to us in food, crime, war, disease and terrors of all kinds. These threats and risks can be hard to avoid. Regardless of the forms our fear take there will be people around to tell us how to avoid them and return some certainty to our worlds. I am most concerned with the ways we can think, act, bear witness and tell our stories in these conditions.

Žižek (2009a: 1) has noted that the first decade of the twenty-first century was bookended by disaster and trauma – the 9/11 terrorist attacks at the beginning of the decade and the GFC at the end. He was particularly struck by the stories that George W. Bush told when he addressed the American people after 9/11 and after the GFC. ‘Bush evoked’, according to Žižek (2009a: 1), ‘the threat to the American way of life and the need to take fast and decisive action to cope with the danger.’ On both occasions President Bush wanted the partial suspension of American values in order to save those values. If this is the consequence of terrorism, it is undoubtedly viewed by the perpetrators as a very effective tactic for getting attention and achieving a variety of political goals.

But I am wary of bold predictions and I do not like to judge too quickly. I am wary of the seeming accuracy (or inaccuracy) of Samuel Huntington’s prediction of a clash of civilisations before 9/11 (Encel, 2002; McDonald, 2002) just as I am wary of economists’ inabilities to predict financial crises. There will be no predictions in this book. But there will be stories – situated ones that describe, with a keen sense of the challenges that meaningful witnessing poses, what it means to be a witness living in a time of terror.
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