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Terror on the Screen: a full length review

Undoubtedly, over the recent years, terrorism affected the functioning of tourism industry in many ways. Most likely, one of the most frightful aspects of this founding events was the fact that terrorists crushed three airplanes towards civilian targets, a point never was done in tactics of terrorism. If in west, social imaginary witnessed the high jacking of planes, bombings, or suicidal attacks, 9/11 represented an innovative platform to show the vulnerability of US. This is the main theme of this fascinating book, *Terror on the Screen* authored originally by Luke Howie, who serves as professor at Monash University, Australia. Of course, as Australian Howie has his own understanding of 9/11 which retained some commonalities but serious differences with Americans. Based on the works of Zizek, Baudrillard and Lacqueur, Howie argues that terrorism is something else than a tactic of violence, but a form of intimidation where witnessing is the key factor. Terrorist do not want a lot of people dying, they want a lot of people watching!.

“The witness is a central figure of this book. I base my arguments in this book on the assumption that no witness terrorism is to be a victim of terrorism since, as Jenkins has argued, terrorist want a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead. Those who watch, those who bear witness, are the intended targets of terrorism” (Howie 2010: p 7).

Allegorically, the media reproduced not only a biased image of 9/11 but animates, in terms of Baudrillard, a simulacra, to locate the discussion in the angles of celebrity-terrorism. Howie, in this vein, introduces readers in a new theory for understanding this slippery matter, but also reminds that terrorists are in pursuit of the same logic of attention, celebrities do. For a climate functional to terrorism unfolds, we need two things. The first is a

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division between us and them, but secondly, the possibility to label the others, as evildoers, or as “the axis of evilness”.

Howie, who combines an interesting argument with 105 qualitative interviews and stories of life, understands that “the concept of theatre” or trauma-escape is of paramount importance to explain why an event, as 9/11, remains enrooted in a site resisting the passing of time. We live in a culture of witnessing which evokes our own vulnerability as city dwellers, but in so doing, many racist practices emerge to point on Muslim collectives. Indeed, one of the main risks consists in “islamophobia”, or any other related chauvinist expression of racism. All lies in the same Pandora box. What remains clear, is that without witness terrorism would never exist.

“The spectacle of terrorism depends of the co-existence of witnesses, images of terrorism, and – in contemporary times- cities. 9/11 happened, it happened on 11 September 2001 in New York City, Washington DC and a field of Pennsylvania. The image, however, is not bound to this temporal and geographic logic. 9/11 was an atemporal event that can be understood in time and space in apparently unlimited coordinates of temporality and spatiality. It resides in the desert of the real of the contemporary city” (p. 60).

Methodologically speaking, he creates a new “phenomenology of terrorism”, which is expressed not by their real effects, but to “the recreation of the media”, modern consumption emulates. Frightening people not only are Americans but the entire world. Even, so distant cities as Melbourne, or even Buenos Aires are more frightful than American cities. The power of amplification of media terrorism is based on the needs of captivating audience in order for enhancing further profits. Just there, where observers or pundits see terrorism as a great evil for West, Howie sees another point in the discussion. As social field-workers, we will never understand terrorism if we reject the idea that 9/11 was a founding event that forged “a culture of witnessing”, which worked as a conduit of terror. Instead of speculating on where the next blow will take place, specialists should explore the effects of terrorism in our daily life. Doubtless, the war on terror declared by Bush’s administration accelerated many of the changes worker unions face today, or even the climate of paranoia, through neoliberal programs are introduced within societies.

This pungent project is divided in two main parts. The first signals to a conceptual debate respecting to how the culture of witnessing has been

constructed in post 9/11 contexts. In this section, Howie unfolds an interesting point of view which is combined with higher-erudition on the legacy of Jean Baudrillard, and his theory of Simulacra. Citing the Matrix Saga, Howie sheds light on how 9/11 posed as an “leading event” that obscured many other similar acts of terrorism in other peripheral cities. At some extent, we think that 9/11 was the first declaration of terrorism against our civilization, and not only this, we reply that they “hate us” simply because we living in comfortable conditions dotted of technology and prosperity. Well, confirming this caveat, we are ignoring that the same strongholds of urban zones such as media communication, information, or transport system, is used for terrorism to instill fear. 9/11 represented point of rupture, a gap, between witnessing and a screen culture of terrorism. The culture of celebrities, as it was studied by scholars concerned by dark tourism sites where visitors consume spaces of mass death, endorse notoriety not only to cities whipped by terrorism, but to survivors and even “pseudo-academicians” whose opinions are on the head of journalist corporation. This uncanny obsession for witnessing created a new terrorism-as-celebrity culture:

“Through 9/11, the Twin Towers and NYC have attained a renewed celebrity status. In a post 9/11 world, NYC and the Twin Towers share something in common with Paris Hilton, Brad Pitt and Britney Spears – people want to see them, people want to know about them, and when their image appear on television and in other media spaces it is difficult for witnesses to look away” (p. 70)

The second part dissects how terrorism draws cultural entertainment industry and popular cinema, which oscillates from *Friends*, towards the industry of pornography. This section contains five final chapters that focus on the role of “terror voyeurism”, in series as *Friends*, *Battlestar Gallactica*, films as *Matrix* among many others. Though they can be read separately, through all them, Howie held the same thesis, terrorism after 9/11 ignited a serious shift in capitalism, which was oriented to manipulate terror as a timeless event to be repeated relentlessly. In this respect, there was an intricate connection of terrorism and media consumption, which today is very difficult to break.

Howie`s argument fits well what Mahmoud Eid (2014) dubbed “Terroredia”, which means the intersection of terrorism and journalism or

in what I (Korstanje 2016a; 2016b) called “Thana-Capitalism”, a recent trend where others` (death) suffering becomes the mainstream cultural value of productive system. Whatever the case may be, obsession for terrorism, as Zizek noted, can be explained (though not for Zizek`s reasons) in the roots of Christianity, not Islam.

Originally, in his book *The Dwarf and the Puppet*, Zizek argues convincingly that Christianity keeps a perverse core which centers on the needs Christ should be betrayed to become God. In this vein, though Christianity forbids the sin, all temptations are placed for humans to fall. Finally, in Christ`s crucifixion God is unable to intervene in the same way, he opted not to alleviate Job`s suffering. In this vein, though Zizek did a great step in examining Christianity as the roots of capitalism, he fails to understand that capitalism is based on the myth of Noah` ark where an Angry-God asked Noah to construct an ark but in secrecy since he and his families and selected animals will be the only salved from total destruction. At a closer look, we see this was the first “genocide” where mass death emerged as a main value. Dividing the world in two, victims and witnesses, the universal flood paved allegorically the ways for the rise of Thana Capitalism. If the medieval peasant lived waiting for their (honorable) death, modern consumers feel a profound fear for death. In times of Thana-capitalism, which replaced the logic of risk-society, the consumption of others` death reinforces an exemplary aura, which is proper of chosen peoples, that leads towards narcissism. By means of media, TV programs, press or journalism the consuming others` death exhibits a current obsession for witnessing disasters, terrorist attacks, and many other traumatic events. When others die people feel happier because in this way, they have in trace, in competition with others, in an atmosphere of social Darwinism. The logic of Thana Capitalism emulates what we can watch in movies as *Hunger Games* or realities as Big Brother where the glory of only one entails the ruin of the rest. Beyond the betrayal of Christ as Zizek precludes, the asymmetries of Thana Capitalism are legalized by the induction to Social Darwinism where few monopolizes much of the produced wealth. The same applies for terrorism, since though news of terrorist attacks shock us, nobody can escape to witnessing them!.

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