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Medusa's Gaze: The Politics and Aesthetics of Horror in the Age of Hyperviolence

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This project argues that traditional frameworks for understanding political violence are no longer valid since they address only the state's and the soldiers' point of view of battle, when increasingly, the representation of war is being co-opted by non-state combatants.

          I investigated the symbiotic relationship between technology, terrorism and the politics of horror. In the 21st century, terrorists are not simply harnessing Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media for logistics, propaganda and recruitment purposes. I examined the process through which new technologies are being used to represent their horrific killings for mass audience consumption, targeting both their own constituencies and their enemies. I mapped out the philosophical, cultural and political terrain of an emerging era where new technologies are not only reshaping the contours of political violence but also contributing to its increasingly sophisticated yet often horrific aestheticization.

Communication

Terror Hashtag Memes Horror Politics Media Virtual Digital

1. Initial Background for Beginning Research

The background of this project looks at the historical relationship and evolution of media technologies on modern day terrorism. The project began by examining four distinct waves of terrorism – anarchist, anti-colonialist, new left of the 60s and finally religious terrorism. While all of them manifest distinct characteristics, the project analyzed how that each of these waves were committed to transforming the entire world or at the very least, changing various regions of the globe through revolutionary thought and violent practice.   However, what set these past waves of globalized terror apart from the most current manifestation are fourfold and they all involve media transformations. The preliminary research notes that the relationship between the first three waves of global terror and mass media was, for the most part, passive. However, as of the third wave, terrorists relationship becomes progressively proactive and participatory.

2. Research Purpose

The purpose of the research was to:

(1) Examine the overlooked and under-studied phenomenon of how the continuity and familiarity of our own media practices and their affective networks are being woven into and reshaping the terms and conditions of modern conflict. In the digital age, with a click of a mouse or touch of a screen, the everyday horrors and consequences of modern conflict routinely constrained or hidden from the Western public eye are now, instantly, made visible.

(2) Trace a historical arc from spectacle violence of ancient times, to 20th century publicity-minded anarchists and terrorists, to net-savvy Islamic extremists who flaunt their war crimes as a marketing strategy.

(3) Investigate the socio-political dimensions of the spectacle violence (ritualized killings, blood sacrifices and public executions).

(4) Examines 20th century terror and its relationship to new technologies and the development of mass media.

(5) Interrogate the innovative media acumen of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi (Al Qaeda in Iraq's brutal emir) and his impact on the communication strategies of new Islamic extremism.

(6) Map the rise of new Islamic extremist messaging and its modern re-branding of militant Islam into a hip, desirable and imitable lifestyle.

(7) Examines the Islamic State's net savvy yet gruesome politics of horror.

3. Research Method

Research methodologies included desktop analysis and interviews with media practitioners, experts and scholars in Europe, Asia, North America and Canada. Archival visits to libraries in Europe, Asia, North America and Canada were made.

4. Research Results

I investigated the symbiotic relationship between technology, terrorism and the politics of horror. In the 21st century, terrorists are not simply harnessing Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media for logistics, propaganda and recruitment purposes. I examined the process through which new technologies are being used to represent their horrific killings for mass audience consumption, targeting both their own constituencies and their enemies. I mapped out the philosophical, cultural and political terrain of an emerging era where new technologies are not only reshaping the contours of political violence but also contributing to its increasingly sophisticated yet often horrific aestheticization.

The project allowed me to produce several journal articles, book chapters and a monograph. Because this project takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of modern terrorism, the finding of Medusa's Gaze will benefit scholars, students, and policy makers in the disciplines of International Relations, Terrorism and Conflict Studies and Mass Communication and Media Studies. Additionally, the project findings will be of interest to institutional policy makers as well as practitioners in the fields of national security, media and communication. Moreover, the project findings will be of interest to a range of journals, including Security Dialogue (Sage), Millennium (Sage), War, Media and Conflict (Sage), and Terrorism and Political Violence (Taylor & Francis). Furthermore, the transnational impact and reach of groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State ensures that the project findings will carry international interest. Lastly, the rise of the Islamic State, its impact on Western security politics and its prodigious media output make the project findings extremely relevant, topical and valuable for many years to come. Some of the academic courses that this project may be useful for include: Conflict Studies, Terrorism Studies, Technology and Crime, New Media Studies and International Relations.

While media and IR scholars have written much on the growing importance of media as a form of strategic communication and its role in the sanitization of the battlefield, this project argues that traditional frameworks for understanding political violence are no longer valid since they address only the state's and the soldiers' point of view of battle, when increasingly, the representation of war is being co-opted by non-state combatants. Moreover, while contemporary media and IR scholarship has focused on the political & historical role of state and corporate media actors in the censorship and sanitization of the battlefield, the academic objective was to investigate and analyze the discursive practices of terrorists who harness new technologies in order to intentionally aestheticize and mediate their ritualized killings of the vulnerable & helpless as a weapon of war but perhaps even more so, as a horrific symbol of post-colonial foundation. By focusing on the affective nature of new technologies & their media platforms, Medusa's Gaze unravels the critical questions that lay at the heart of the perverse yet performative bond between the contemporary terrorism, the politics of horror and its mediatized frame.

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Peter Mantello			
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