

Terrorist Video and the New Iconoclasm in Art after 11. September

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Abstract

Iconoclastic violence acquired a new form in the recent conflict with terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. The fascination of terrorists with the home video and with "live" or "real time" presentations on TV has all the attributes of new iconoclasm. Its goal is to defeat the most powerful images in our time, the film and the TV image. These images may not be holy as in the past but they bear the same power and control over our feelings and actions. While the Gulf war CNN spectacle represented our power over the enemy by new means of satellite broadcasting, the recent "minimalist" and "low-tech" terrorist video tapes have overthrown this media power with the use of its own weapons - moving and real time images. The new iconoclasm of the home video poses many challenges to contemporary art that are analyzed in terms of iconoclastic issues of power, authenticity, transcendence and representation.

1. Media and violence: innocent home videos

The strange affinity between video and terrorism that appeared several times after the events of 11. September showed that the relationship between war and media has changed since the Gulf War media spectacle. The recent conflict with terrorism has rather strange media and technology side effects that could be described as iconoclastic. The machines and media started to serve completely odd and often destructive ends. Airplanes become bombs, cell phones serve to communicate with the nether world of victims' dreadful last calls, and the innocent and private character of home video is elevated to an espionage movie genre, mean of propaganda and destruction.

The famous terrorist videotapes of Usama bin Ladin (UBL) that represent this new function of the home video actually fulfill the dream of every amateur video maker who sends his films to "America's funniest home videos" or similar programs. Finally, here is a genre of home videos that can enter the prime time of every TV station in the world. Amateur video, in UBL's interpretation, is not only about "shooting" something on your own, but enabling others to record something previously unseen by choosing the right targets and means of destruction.

While the Gulf War is remembered for the spectacular nature of the televised destruction of Iraq, this recent war will be remembered for its encounters with home video. UBL's videos have also managed to exceed the difference between political analysis and film criticism. They literally merged in the discussions about whether the videos he was sending to different

TV stations are propaganda or authentic. It closely resembles the general discussions about video's authenticity compared to other visual media.

The details from UBL's videos like mountains, meaning of the neutral background or his supposedly tired and sick look became a serious field of inquiry. The information from the battlefield were actually less important than these long analyses of what is real and what is digitally altered in these videos and for what reason. Such a complicated espionage plot with hidden secret codes makes the whole amateur video look like an art movie with a complicated system of references. UBL became also known for his steganographic techniques of using the digits of pornographic pictures on the web to convey hidden messages. It is fascinating to follow how these analyses of terrorist videos and pictures evolve into sophisticated art theories. Terrorist "video art" has not only intricate and complex system of references and subtexts but it also has interactive abilities. There are sleeping terrorists similar to viewers of art movies that are waiting for the coded message somewhere in the world to act.

But are these coded messages really hidden in these pictures and videos? After all, we are dealing with home video and porno pictures that by definition reveal much more that they hide even when they are not used by a terrorist. Porno pictures have a very ambiguous relation to violence and maybe UBL only makes apparent what was already present there. The narcissistic, confessional and reality TV characteristics of home videos were closely connected to this medium long before UBL made his confession on one of the most publicized videotape in December 2001. From this perspective, the (mis)use of media and technology by terrorism seems less odd than the actual fascination of media with terrorism and violence in general.

2. Terrorist "videoart" and Iconoclasm

What still remains interesting about the conflict with terrorism is how it has shifted into this cross-reflection between film, news coverage and home video that slowly blur and blend together. One of the reasons could be that UBL's cinema has a very close link to the rules of Dogme 95: shooting is done on location without props and sets, the sound is recorded together with the image, the camera is handheld, no special effects, filters or even lighting. UBL's films could easily obtain a Dogme certificate because they are in accordance with all the ten rules known as "The Vow of Chastity."

A shot with all its imperfections and surprises is at the core of this film making. We can even hear the cameraman breathing in the December 2001 terrorist video, which makes the whole movie a very direct and even physical experience. The cameraman's breathing, whispering or even talking changes the video-recording into an even more pure version of Dogme 95.

The realism of this most known UBL video consists of the physical presence of the cameraman, that changes the simple viewers into a real witnesses of the "leader", breathing together with the cameraman. These purist rules and ideals, these shots without cuttings refusing visual manipulations, express more general terrorist attitudes and visions of the world than mere violence and destructive coded messages.

UBL's videos are simply a continuation of the iconoclast war by visual means. Instead of the destruction of images we have images that destroy their objects, pictures that were made in order to destroy what they present, and by that become obsolete. For example, there is the destruction of the two Buddha statues in Bamiyan. It was done with the intention of destroying visual representations and idols but at the same time this destruction was recorded by the Taliban itself. All Usama bin Ladin's video recordings are images of the destruction of images, idols and symbols, most notably the Pentagon and the WTC. It is not clear, however, if this is still just terrorism with the use of a camera or real terrorist video art, a revival of the auto-destructive art project that surpass the difference between image and event, representation and presentation. Simple viewing becomes witnessing, in the strong sense, as in the case of the iconoclast shots of the September epiphany of destruction. Not only because this was recorded in real time but also directly broadcast.

These "live" home videos of the WTC attack deteriorate our common understanding of the function of images. Instead of simulation of possible worlds or augmentation of our visual possibilities and other voyeuristic pleasures, we were confronted with images showing what we thought to be impossible and what became in one moment literal and even trivial. This technology in the service of absolute presence via destruction was not only performed by the terrorist but also forced upon the victims that were sharing their last moments over cell phones. It is actually a suicidal attack of the media themselves. Suddenly there are images that represent their truth and function only by destroying themselves. They do not mediate anything except their own destruction.

The relation between the iconoclast esthetics of the home video and the terrorism is not accidental and that is the reason why we use the expression "terrorist video art". It is not meant as disrespect to art or to the victims but as a general statement that every political ideology embraces certain esthetics that reveal more about its character than a complex political and social analysis. As Walter Benjamin showed in the opposition between "politicization of art" in communism and the "esthetization of politics" in fascism, technological inventions and their new esthetic possibilities define the political ideologies of certain time.

The transformation that made possible communism and fascism was the mechanical reproduction of the work of art that destroyed the unity and the authenticity, the aura of the traditional art but also the type of subject that contemplates such art. Film and photography present a new type of control and political systems closely connected to a new type of collective subjectivity - the mass audience in the cinema.

In this respect, the terrorist effort to destroy the new technological apparatuses and the contemporary form of subjectivity defined by them goes hand in hand with their political mission to restore old, ritualized "auratic" form of society. This political iconoclasm inspired by certain esthetics is a type of destruction that does not introduce innovation but tries to restore old traditions. Terrorist video art showing the destruction of our media, and other technological means that define our civilization, is not a simple terror. It is rather an example of estheticized terrorism like fascism, while the immediate pathetic reaction of the "civilized world" in many cases resembles a "politicized art" (patriotic and sentimental poems, collages etc.).

3. The new cave and its Plato

This new iconoclastic strategy of images showing the destruction of images does prove to be very efficient with respect to its consequence on our media and on the subjectivity they represent. We do not need to see action movies anymore to experience real collapse of skyscrapers or the destruction of world wonders when they happen in real time. We do not need a complicated talk show to experience direct and trivial confessions etc. The iconoclasm of the terrorist video recording transforms all our objects of imagination into trivial forms that point to the futility of their representation.

Usama bin Ladin as the new Plato from his cave tries to resolve once again the problem of simulation and reality, truth and shadows, tradition and destruction, this time with the use of video. Unfortunately, similar battles against the shadows on the wall of the cave always end up with a new ideal city of demented guardians and charismatic philosopher-kings that terrorize the rest of the world as the Taliban did in Afghanistan. The famous December 2001 UBL's video even shows a setting similar to Plato's dialogues. It starts as chatter among friends presenting their stories and stories of other friends. They laugh together, flatter each other, and in the end they just comment on how many new followers they have succeeded in recruiting. The terrorist indulgence in video is clearly stated in the beginning, when bin Ladin's friend, titled Sheik, describes his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, where another Sheik Al-Bahrani gave some incredible speech. This speech was recorded on a video but he was not able to bring it with him since he was trying to escape.

Similar regressive moves to the speeches of other people that are not present and that are quoted in length also characterize Plato's dialogues. In contrast to these witty and rhetorically perfect speeches, Usama's dialogues resemble the boring and ritualized passages from St. Paul that include the ever-present word "brothers". The speech is reduced to a very ritualized and constantly recurrent phrases "Allah be praised", "Allah is great",

"Praise Allah." These expressions are common in the Arabic language but in bin Ladin's "Video-Symposium" everything repeats itself: expressions about martyrs, dreams and visions, quotes from the Koran, identical descriptions of the happiness in front of the TV in the day of the attack etc. The morbid reiteration is also typical for his terror attacks on the two embassies in Africa, Twin Towers, Pentagon and another site all in one day. This also brings back the issue of the relation between esthetic and terrorism since this emphasis on repetition could be ironically derived from Islamic abstract art.

The description of celebrations in front of the TV after the attack is another example of the ambiguity surrounding terrorist iconoclasm. The celebrations after the attacks are compared to a victory celebration after a football match, revealing the very secular character of the jihad. We even hear about a dream of some follower of UBL in which an Arab football team of pilots beats the West. These metaphors and dreams that are inspired by the media and the West and do not follow the religious rhetoric reveal the genuine banality of this evil. The terrorist attack against the West actually mimics the excitement from the world cup in football.

The whole video from December 2001 ends up with a completely bizarre comparative analysis of prophetic dreams related to the 11. September attack. Usama bin Ladin at one point even admits that he was worried that the dreams of people around him could disclose his plans. In that moment it seems that the iconoclasm as any political terror bows to these inner images and dreams that it can not regulate and that disclose more than they should. It also reveals that the absolute goal of every dictator and tyrant is to control what people are dreaming, their "inner" life that otherwise presents their principle freedom.

4. Media Iconoclasm in the Art after the 11. Sept.

The immediate response of the art community to the September events and the war in Afghanistan does not offer any interesting material for analysis except in terms of "politicized art". Only later works indicate a certain common topic and strategy that tackle the issue of iconoclasm and the relation between esthetics and politics, or art and terrorism, and the problem of representation and power.

Many of these later works have the form of a "pixelized" criticism of the omnipresent media images that captured, haunted but also desensitized the public after the attacks. Other works are part of certain "anatomy of sorrow" that started with the inflation of pathetic and kitsch collages on the Internet after the 11. September. This stage was slowly overcome by more abstract, and minimalist collages that developed into performative gestures. These performative experiments show that the new media art is no longer only a simple web-site or even application, but offers also interesting self-reflection on the forms of representation on the web. Special group of post-September art works shows and criticizes the iconoclasm present in our relation to the war with Afghanistan. Very few images from this war appeared on the Western TV and it seems that we deprived the people of Afghanistan of the right to show their images. For that reason some artists like Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi proposed a remote-controlled robot reporter, the "Afghan eXplorer" http://compcult.media.mit.edu/afghan_x/ that will broadcast news for us since US has disallowed field journalists in war zones. Other artists like John Klima have built a digital relief map of Afghanistan resembling a standard computer 3-D "shooter" game. This "Great Game" at <http://www.cityarts.com/greatgame> simulates what is happening in Afghanistan with the use of information from the Defense Department briefings. The real war is reduced to a simulated computer game that we do not actually play but only watch. This exaggerates how limited the amount is of information that flows from that region. We can not properly visualize what is happening there, so our understanding is reduced to an experience with a simplified game.

All three categories of art (pixelized and media criticism, digital collages and performative experiments) as a response to the terrorist attacks and the war are interesting in respect to how they treat the iconoclast issue. The "pixelized criticism" of the media representations uses the familiar images from the TV and alters them in order to deconstruct their iconic function. In the case of Eryk Salvaggio's online work "September 11th, 2001" <http://www.anatomyofhope.net/wtc/2/> the goal is to show that the slaughtered people are not only "images, tape loops, and abstract symbols" but real people with names and families. Salvaggio uses the letters from their names as "pixels", elements of the famous picture of the airplane hitting the WTC. This picture is no longer only a representation of the destruction of the WTC but more like a poem that connects the victims with these buildings in a very direct and shocking way. It forces us to think behind the media representations and acknowledge that no picture can convey the immense tragedy of these people. Another strategy of this iconoclast fight against the media images to which we tend to reduce our experience of the attack, is the online project of Antonio Mendoza which uses the format of the web pages as lenses that magnify but also distort the media images <http://www.subculture.com/crash1.html>. In this "web movie" we experience no longer the horror of these pictures but the horror of loosing our power and control over their representation and the media. Photographs are reduced to pixels that remind us of some old computer game, the mouse as a navigation tool serves more as a target position indicator or other violent tool, and the windows shake, open and close without our will. Very similar experience of loosing control over the images as a type of iconoclast reaction introduces the web project of Renald Drouhin "Take action" <http://ici.ciev.fr/>. The poor quality of the web-cam stills on this website causes fear and a feeling of danger even when they present completely neutral sites. After the attack on the WTC we experience all these pictures as sites of potential catastrophe and not as a public space.

While the "pixelized" criticism mainly targets the media presentation of the conflict, the collages as a typical technique connected to 11. September developed into abstract and even performative art on the web as another aspect of iconoclasm. While the common collages expressed their tribute through patriotic and often pathetic use of pictures and symbols, these abstract collages express their solidarity by projecting the famous twin buildings into unexpected shapes and objects. This abstract tribute for example interprets the date 11. as a symbol of the two buildings - the website of Mellissa Gould on

<http://www.megophone.com/wtc.html> or on a French website <http://rebusparis.com/elevenseptember/>. There are also many attempts to express the geometrical and architectonic perfection of these buildings as a tribute and opposition to the prevalent kitsch pictures. Good example is the collage "Skyscaper" by Tii Johansson http://www.a-virtual-memorial.org/memorials/terror/artists/tiia_johansson.htm or an art work from Pakistan by Asifa R. Naqvi "Art, Architecture, Space" <http://www.asifrnaqvi.com/>. His flash animation shows different architectonic views of the buildings that objectify them and bring back their "rational" origin against the irrationality of the destruction and mourning. This project has an interesting subtitle "Interactive dictionary of NYCWTC 911" that is trying to remind us that we should think about the WTC buildings in terms of incredible work of architecture and civilization and not only as an object of barbaric destruction. Against the language of terror and destruction presented by the media images we should always pose this language of constructing and architecture. Similar message is conveyed also in the posters by Guillermo Kuitca <http://www.timetoconsider.org/submissions3.html> that were part of the "Time to Consider" poster campaign.

The most interesting iconoclast response of the art after the events of 11.September are the performative attempts in which the computer is used not as a medium but as an object per se. The tribute is paid not with a help of a picture or even a word or other system of presentation but by certain actions we perform when we use the mouse, computer screen and other basic tools as part of our life with a computer. The destruction and the missing buildings are expressed here by certain actions that problematize our habits of using the mouse and manipulating objects on the screen. For example the windows do not serve to organize and even represent items but are used as geometrical shapes that resemble the shape of the twin towers. This type of tribute is not a collage and not even a web site but an action that has a meaning. Good example of such performative art work on a computer is a piece done by an artist named jimpunk who changed his Macintosh screen with two empty windows in the shape of the buildings and made a screen shot of this. http://www.whyproject.org/images/jimpunk_remember.gif

Similar tribute is much more personal than a collage done in PhotoShop, because it involves the whole computer of a concrete person that performs certain actions on its very intimate level, the screen that for a moment serves only as a tribute. Another project by the same artist shows a similar iconoclast performance <http://www.jimpunk.com/NYC/wtc/>. After we click on the button, two empty windows pop up and then disappear and a message "remember" appears in the background screen. Here the whole tribute is expressed through an action of the empty pop up windows. Similar to this is also the website "Hole in the sky, Hole in my heart" on <http://www.mixedmediaonline.com/091101.html> where we see blank picture boxes with the typical sign of a missing picture on the web that usually indicates a mistake. This mistake actually represents the missing buildings and it is the most radical example of computer screen and windows iconoclasm that expresses messages not by representation but by certain actions - performances.

Conclusion

Essential about UBL's videos is that they are ultimately boring but we are trying to find in them some deeper meaning and secret signs of the Evil. From the philosophical point of view all of his iconoclast attacks on the Western world only repeats the close relation between media and destruction, the hidden agenda behind every quest for absolute truth, presence and authenticity. Every medium has this iconoclast longing to disappear and reveal the pure reality that is translated into projects such as "objective news", "reality TV", "live cinema", different types of "arche-writing" etc. But there is also a "positive" iconoclasm that is represented by the artistic response to the 11.September. This iconoclasm does not intend to destroy but uses the iconoclastic mechanisms in order to gain independence and experiment with new forms of expression.

From the political point of view, UBL's videos reveal only the close connection between terror and banality similar to one described by Hannah Arendt after seeing the Eichmann trial. It is not only the banality of every terror that unambiguously shows what it states, but even more the terror of banality, of trivial and ritualized speeches, formulas and acts that reduce individuals to agents of a system that serves only its own goals, which are historical and not related to individual lifetime. Any ideology is just like a misused machine that does not serve the ends of people but uses people as a means.

Reference

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