



THE TRAUMA OF TERRORISM: VIOLENCE OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

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Abstract – This article discusses the main ideas in my book *German Cinema – terror and trauma*: cultural memory since 1945, where the meaning of the Holocaust for post-war German movies is re-evaluated, in order to provide a reconsideration of Trauma Theory today. I argue that Germany's attempts to "dominate the past" can be seen both as a failure and an achievement, making it appropriate to speak of an ongoing "guilty management" that includes not only Germany, but Europe as a whole.

Keywords: Terrorism. German cinema. Red Army Fraction. Trauma. Fassbinder.

Terror and trauma – two words heard everywhere, but already used up due to over exposure before we could actually know what they mean. Since 9/11, they have become a part of our political discourse, although not coined for political use; they serve to emotionalise incidents, states of mind, and phenomena, banking on the rhetorical effects triggered by their juxtaposition. Sometimes, these words just make one speechless in face of horrific suffering, almost inconceivably cruel acts of violence, which come to us through images and figures that overwhelm due to the sheer number of victims; these words involve hate and revenge, but also chance and arbitrariness. On other occasions, they are meant to stir up passion, generate heat, but the latter does not shed much light on the facts. So steeped are we in these images that, when speaking of terror and trauma, it is often as if actual violence has become indistinguishable from symbolic, somatic, and semantic violence¹.

This ominous inseparability, which makes distinguishing terror from trauma imperative, is one of the reasons why these terms are thought through and brought together herein. They are the "Siamese twins" of a current political and media discourse from which further

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1 - For a definition emphasizing media intentions and effects while providing further differentiations of the words "terror" and "terrorism", see contributions in Galli and Preusser (2005).

questions arise regarding their uneasy intimacy, particularly concerning their syntactic status: are these concepts transitive, implying causal agency, or do they behave intransitively, each one merely providing a designation to intangible nexus of situations and affects, without object, direction, or origin? Together, they evoke both the state of emergency, so keenly felt in the Western world over the past decade, and the sense of paralysis – political, but also intellectual – that this state of emergency seems to have triggered. Often, it is not even clear who is inducing panic and what causes the paralysis: is it the conspiratorial determination of the right, to use the politics of fear to retain or regain power, or is it the exhaustion and indecision of the liberal (USA) and social-democratic (EU) left?

My book² addresses the afterlife, or the many afterlives, of the West German Red Army Fraction (RAF) during the relatively brief time between 1973 and 1977 (ELSAESSER, 2007). A period when this so-called "revolutionary cell" engaged in a series of spectacular acts of robbery and arson, kidnap and assassination, car chases and shoot-outs, culminating in the following events: the arrest of its first generation (Ulrike Meinhof, Andreas Baader, Jan Carl Raspe, Gudrun Ensslin), generically known as the Hot Autumn of 1977; the kidnap and assassination of Hans Martin Schleyer; the hijack of a Lufthansa plane in Mogadishu; and the suicide of three of the high-profile RAF prisoners in Stuttgart Stammheim, when the plane was stormed by special forces.

My main aim is understanding RAF's afterlife since 1977, not only from the perspective its members saw themselves and their actions – whether as a Marxist vanguard of world history, Germany's "return of the repressed"; as a counter-violence to State's violence; or as caught up in a particular brutal and virulent version of "ordinary" generational conflict –, but in relation to my subtitle: violence of the past in the present. In addition to lines of reciprocity or contagion, mutuality and interdependence, under antagonistic conditions, as a wave-like pressure on the present, with all kinds of feedback loops.

In other words, I seek to identify the transferential rationale that connects individuals, groups, or generations to actions named as terrorist and to events that are said to be traumatic, whose place in memory and recall not only does not follow a chronology, instead it resorts to recurs in loops and cycles, but also releases some energy that leads to a re-assignment of causality and agency, implying reciprocal, but intertwined interactions of power and presence that do not exclude the reversibility of the positions of victim and perpetrator.

In a similar vein, but showing a rather "paranoid" turn, there is an idea that the respective positions of victim and perpetrator are both masterminded, with those who pull the strings resolutely remaining off-stage³. In R. W. Fassbinder's *Die Dritte Generation* (1979), an industrialist played by Eddie Constantine and a part-time policeman (the creepily sheepish

2 - Translated into English as *German Cinema – terror and trauma: cultural memory since 1945* (Routledge, 2013).

3 - This was a view put forward in several contributions to *Semiotexte: The German Issue*, v. 4, n. 2, 1982.

looking Hark Bohm) share a joke: the policeman had the idea, which came to him in a dream, that capitalism itself has invented terrorism, in order to force the State to better protect capital's interests.

After 9/11, Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas had a famous dialogue, which resulted in the book titled *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. Therein, Derrida voiced the opinion that terrorism has become an "auto-immunity disorder"; "produced by the United States during the Cold War and after", a kind of "suicide of those who [...] armed and trained [the terrorists]" (p. 33). The terrorists' act is a product of what it rejects, a mirror image of its target. The prognosis is sombre: a product of the violence that seeks to suppress it, terrorism has created a trauma that cannot be relieved by mourning, because the heart of trauma is not the past event, but fear of a future event whose catastrophic nature can only be guessed. The circle is almost unbreakable: terrorism and what it is against are locked in a reciprocal game of destruction, where causes may no longer be distinguished from consequences.

Derrida describes therein, through so many words, the rationale that made Reverend Jeremiah Wright so infamous, when he quoted Ambassador Peck quoting Malcolm X on Fox News in 2001: "America's chicken are coming home to roost".

Fassbinder, Derrida, Reverend Wright: jokers in dubious taste or tellers of untouchable, tabooed truths? The moves and counter-moves that, according to Derrida, come together in the event of 9/11 and its aftermath, retrospectively rewriting for us the 45 years of post-war history preceding it, have all contributed to combine terror and trauma in an unprecedented way.

First, during the Cold War, the USA itself armed and trained the Islamic militants, creating the religious fundamentalists and post-ethnic local and tribal identities that turned against the West⁴. What made this situation volatile and unpredictable was the *fall of the wall*, since then there is no "deterrence" to keep a (symmetrical) balance of terror between two superpowers.

Now that power relations are a-symmetrical and opponents act not out of self-preservation, but for the sake of their own lives (along with the lives of others), conflicts take on the logic of "pre-emptive" action. However, as recent years have shown, pre-emption not only replicates and multiplies the enemy; its lack of legal grounding undermines the very principles on behalf of which the interventions were supposed to be undertaken (BAUDRILLARD, 2003).

These kinds of refracted-replicated mirror-relationships, with their fatal forms of retaliatory reciprocity, apply now, also in relation to RAF. The question, however, is not only which are the patterns and the dynamics sustaining the mostly symbolic violence of endless

4 - A similar argument about the dynamics of re-ethnisation under the sway of outside interference and internal destabilisation has been put forward by Klaus Theweleit (2003), under the term "enforced loyalty".

debates and TV talk show episodes, but who, in each case, are the players, the protagonists, the positions that that posthumous as well as retrospective agency? Derrida's insight regarding the shift in temporality is crucial here: trauma is no longer the attempt to recover and reconstitute the past, but a way of being detained in anticipatory waiting: "the spectre of terror and trauma lies not in a date in the past, but in an incomprehensible future intimated by that event" (BORRADORI, 2003, p. 34). Derrida also focuses on the new dimension that have entered (symmetrical) tit-for-tat situations, which go beyond the usual calculus of "escalation" or, to use rather technical language, the "positive feedback loops" generated by cycles of "retaliation" and "reprisals" that have hitherto characterized war-like conflict situations. Terror and trauma as temporal vectors are now conjoined, in a spiral that has been identified as one of the new "global" epistemes, characterized by reflexivity and risk⁵.

RAF, both because it looks very remote now and its repercussions remained mainly confined to Germany, might be a useful test-case, in order to once more unwind this spiral, as well as to unpack the terms of the asymmetrical power and mirror relationships mentioned above. The Federal Republic, whose history since 1945 was shaped by the aftermath, first of Nazi terror, then of the legacy of a nation ideologically divided for 45 years, has known more reversals and symmetries, more retrospective reviews and temporalities involving delay and deferral, than most other countries.

Nowhere else there is a greater need for understanding what is involved in the current context of terror and trauma than in Germany. Also by the same token, there is perhaps no other place in Europe where acts of terrorism, wherever they might occur, evoke such troubled memories and expose so many sensitivities as in Germany. Can its politicians and intellectuals speak, now, with a special kind of authenticity and authority when it comes to the "war on terror"? Or, on the contrary, is Germany still so traumatized by its own role in the horrors of the 20th century that, no matter what is said (and, even more, done) in the arena of the public sphere, it suffers from this slippage between physical or psycho-somatic violence and symbolic or semantic violence? Post-unification German foreign policy, aspiring as it does to playing a mediating role between Russia and EU, undertaking humanitarian missions in Kosovo, supporting the NATO coalition in Afghanistan, or partnering the quartet in the Middle East, points at the first (i.e. using the authority of a country strenuously undertaking to master its past to become an "honest broker")⁶. However, domestically, in the heated debates over the Dresden bombings, the minor and major scandals caused by politicians mis-speaking or misbehaving at commemorative events, in controversies over the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, in agonized discussions over movies such as *Der Untergang* (Downfall)

5 - For one of the first formulations of this new episteme, see Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994, p. 1-55).

6 - Jacques Derrida (1994) would provide the Hamlet-ghost new international configuration validity through the coinage "hauntology", although he was surely referring to the opening sentence of Marx & Engels' *Communist Manifesto*.

or Germany's refugees from the East, all suggest the latter, i.e. a jittery feeling of a nation still walking collectively on very thin ice. The afterlife of RAF definitely belongs to this category as well, feeding on peculiar kinds of irritation and agitation, and almost invariably producing a revolving door situation between victims and perpetrators, survivors and bystanders.

A significant factor in the afterlife of RAF, as of the Nazi regime itself (with which RAF is now so closely interwoven, although initially it was RAF that claimed to expose the hidden afterlife of Hitler's accomplices), is the power of the icon, whether in the form of Nazi symbols, highly memorable, instantly recognizable, and already used like brands by the regime, or those of RAF, e.g. the five-pointed red star logo, with a black Heckler & Koch MP5 sub-machine gun and white lettering, or the equally iconic mug-shots on the "wanted" posters put up by the police in every West German post-office in the early 1970s.

In Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, the self-styled "professor of Hitler Studies" and his wife, Babette, have the following talk: "He was on again last night", said Babette. "He's always on", answered Jack, "we couldn't have television without him" (DELILLO, 1985, p. 68). In the intervening 25 years, DeLillo's improbable remark has, if anything, become even truer – so much that the ubiquitous History channel is routinely referred to as "the Hitler channel" by bloggers⁷ – while, in Germany, one would have to add Baader, Meinhof, and Ensslin "are always on". In this relationship between past events and the violence of their return as images, trauma is indeed not located in the past, but points at the future. Or, more precisely, agreeing with Derrida, one could say that the past is only one of the several timelines of trauma: rooted in, but also rewriting the past, it stretches into the future, insofar as repetition and feedback loops connote the death of distance to the past, as well as keeping the past in undead suspension, thereby blocking the project of a future and paralyzing the present.

RAF has a way of returning every ten years: 1997 and 2007 were very conspicuous dates, but the imminent release in 2008 and 2009 of those sentenced in the late 1970s to 20-odd years in prison was also enough to set off the media flares and another round of soul-searching. If anniversaries used to be obvious moments of return, they are no longer needed: in the age of television and the internet, the very idea of either a fixed site or fixed date for trauma's return has become obsolete, replaced by 24-hour news cycles, repeats or re-runs. The authenticity of the moving image – capturing time itself and storing it forever – yields this powerful sense of presence, while repetition immerses the same presence in the timeless realm of myth. Moving image media have a special relation to history and remembrance, and one of their crucial characteristics, namely, the immediacy with which the past can return as the present, enables them to share a structural affinity with trauma.

7 - See <http://www.sexstone.net/mettenarch28.html>, which cites several references to the History Channel as the "Hitler Channel".

Derrida provides another clue, when he talks of "spectre", but we need to apprehend what this means. If trauma describes one side – the untimeliness and the unpredictability with which violence of the past can visit the present, then spectrality, that aura of ungraspable, but palpable hyper-mediality, captures the other side of this presence, where it is space that is layered and superimposed, rather than time that returns. There are the iconic press photographs of Rudi Dutschke's shoe or Siegfried Buback's Mercedes riddled with bullets, the already mentioned police photos of suspects, or the forensic pictures of the dead Ulrike Meinhof – immortalized in Gerhard Richter's blur paintings. These images and many others are re-staged in Ulrich Edel's *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* – like the greatest hits of a rock band on tour.

To this poster-iconography of grainy video we must add tape-recordings released to the press and RAF manifestos published in student journals or smuggled out of prison: these are the hybrid spaces and the aural static – one is tempted to name them as the "augmented realities of RAF" – that, along with radio broadcasts and TV images filling the living-rooms of the Federal Republic, *are* RAF today. RAF's political programme has been forgotten, as a reaction to the Vietnam war, as a protest against the stationing of NATO Pershing missiles on European soil, or as a display of solidarity with freedom fighters in Latin America; in fact, forgotten, too, is their almost pathological hatred of the USA, now that Andreas Baader is most often compared to a wannabe James Dean, and the RAF exploits are likened to Warren Beatty and Fay Dunaway striking the pose in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde*.

Thus, what has to be explained is not only why there is this periodic or cyclical RAF return. Is it also at stake the reason why a violent anti-USA protest group, practicing the politics of resistance and the armed struggle copied from the liberations and guerrilla movements of South-East Asia and Latin America, turned, according to public perception, into copycats of movie stars, acting out plots of Hollywood B-movies? Wolfgang Kraushaar (2004), one of the half dozen or so full-time professional RAF historians, also evokes the metaphor of the ghost: "It is true, the RAF has perished long ago and entered into Federal Germany's history. At the same time, however, a ghost going by the same name appears to be stalking the land, able to cause considerable commotion and unease".

By means of Derrida's spectrality, we may be able to track this mutation from politics to pop via the connotations of "ghost" in RAF's self-understanding and afterlife. In the 1970s, when the term first crops up, the most frequent association was with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, particularly in the constellation of an unavenged father, appearing as a ghost to the son, burdening him with the task of retribution against the usurper. It fitted the immediate post-war generation's obsession with the good-bad father image, an Oedipal conflict that RAF activists staged in a particularly flamboyant way, trying to catch the (Nazi) fathers in the "mousetrap" of State terrorism, police raids, curfews, and "Berufsverbot", but they also over-identified with them in a similarly violent fashion, in a mixture of wounded narcissism and

self-hatred, which followed a pre-ordained pattern as much Freudian as it was anthropological in its mirroring function.

In contrast to Hamlet's ghost, as emblem of RAF's historical double-bind, the ghosts of RAF today and of its afterlife are not their acts, but rather the media images these acts produced, both more than documents (because of the "toxicity" of icons and slogans), and less than documentations (because part of a propaganda war of images fought by both sides). These image ghosts have so far haunted two generations: the generation of the former activists, fellow travellers, sympathisers, members of the left who, after the 1970s, abandoned radical politics and rejoined post-bourgeois society. The spectrum of successful re-entry reached from "green" politicians like Joshka Fischer and Daniel Cohn Bendit, to university professors, media entrepreneurs, software developers, and publishers. Fisher nearly lost his job as Foreign minister when a blurry press photo resurfaced of him hitting a policeman during a street demonstration in Frankfurt.

The second generation is that of their children, who either consider the 1970s as the last heroic period they were unlucky enough to just miss,⁸ or who were captivated by RAF as a sound scape and image emporium, and they appropriated the icons and the lingo as style items and fashion accessories.

However, their performative modes of engagement should not be dismissed as merely frivolous⁹: re-working the five-pointed star into a "Prada-Meinhof" logo on t-shirts and other accoutrements may seem the height of cynicism, but it is not without its own historical as well as semiotic rationale. It counters the deadening undeadness of public debates, with their endless repetitions of disavowal and affective investment, of for-and-against, of on-the-one-hand/on-the-other, of everyone competing for victim position, by resorting to a rather direct and graphic expression of mismatch and incongruity, in the idioms that were designed to register – "but also cash in on – precisely such clashes in perception, sensibility, and values: namely, pop art, brand identity, advertising. These only repeat (and thus comment on), in the most authentic medium of inauthenticity, i.e. fashion, what in the 1970 was even more shocking: the screaming headlines of the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*, the defamatory paranoia of editorials in serious papers such as *Die Welt*, and the deliberately disorientating word-image collages on the front covers of *Quick* or *Stern*, West Germany's mass-circulation illustrated weeklies.

8 - Reinhard Mohr (1992, p. 2): "Die 78er, die heute auf die vierzig zugehen, kamen zu spät zur Revolte der sechziger Jahre und standen dann, in den Achtzigern, vor den verschlossenen Türen der reformierten Gesellschaft, die sie gar nicht zu brauchen schien. [...] Als Angehörige einer historisch »überflüssigen« Zwischengeneration fielen sie durch den imaginären Rost des Zeitgeistes. Anders als die »Alt-68er« und die postmodernen »Neonkids« haben die 78er keine politisch oder kulturell griffige Symbolik entwickelt, die sie auf Anheb identifizierbar machte. Sie verfügten über kein Label, kein Erkennungszeichen".

9 - "Wie kommt es, dass historische Episoden, die eine ganze Generation geschockt haben, für eine spätere Generation schon Spielmaterial werden können?" (WARNKE, 2003, p. 78).

Thus, the pop appropriation of RAF is, in itself, not an illegitimate way of trying to cut some of these Gordian knots, but an "acting out" in a situation intuited as either deadlocked or disavowed: RAF's history of movie land violence, street theatre terror, and acts of gross inhumanity had taboos enough to tempt another generation into breaking them, by playing with them, *pour épater les bien-pensants*. What has been acted out is not any fascination for this kind of direct action or the political programme meant to justify terrorist violence, but rather that earlier play with images, icons, and signs by newspaper and television journalists, by RAF, as well as by the police: all of them more calculatedly demagogic and propagandist than the display, 30 years later, of RAF's logo on t-shirts, underwear, or handbags. And this would be one of the lessons learned from the case study of RAF's afterlife: aided and abetted by their apparent enemies, the popular press, the State apparatus, and the police – RAF was among the pioneers of terrorism as *graffiti warfare*, even as they thought of themselves as conducting *guerrilla warfare*.

Then, I come to my conclusion. Rather than talking of a "return of the repressed" or a "compulsion to repeat" my argument is that the periodic return of RAF, in the form of media-events, revelations, confessions, and, yes, feature films and TV mini-series, has to do with their complex, but contradictory media presence right from the start: RAF remains not just undead, but symptomatically so: because of the images that circulate about them, or rather because of the discrepancy between the group's clandestine, hidden, and underground existence – picture-shy and shadowy – and its actions, which were specifically designed to produce images: of destruction, chaos, mayhem, blood, and death. RAF threw bombs, but as in all subsequent terrorist actions, their machine gun burst of light and fire were also flash-bulbs, helping to arrest the flow of ordinary life, and terminate innocent lives, in order to expose an imaginary filmstrip that was to fix forever the moment that was theirs, and it has become collective history.

It is therefore not a matter of finding closure or of putting ghosts to rest. Almost the exact opposite: the point of these ghosts remaining undead is not that they are reminders of unfinished business. They suggest that both the hysteria and the helplessness, the politics of fear and the paralysis of indecision are also indicative of the fact that we have not learnt, yet, how to deal effectively with the agency inherent to our media and movie images, as not only carriers of trauma and conduits of terror, but as permanent presences, as too much bodies, and as apparitions too palpable, thus, as a new kind of "virtual" but nonetheless real political actor. There might lie a task not just for this panel, but for film and media studies: in the age of digital replication and augmented reality, can film help us harness the energies embedded in our images in a more productive way, so that the toxic ones eventually become redundant or dissolve themselves, as RAF itself famously did in 1998 – a year after the 20-year commemoration of the Hot Autumn had made it over-exposed as image?

O trauma do terrorismo: a violência do passado no presente

Resumo – Este artigo discute as principais ideias do meu livro *Cinema alemão – terror e trauma*: memória cultural desde 1945, no qual o significado do Holocausto para os filmes alemães do pós-guerra é reavaliado, de modo a oferecer uma reconsideração da Teoria do Trauma hoje. Defendo que as tentativas da Alemanha de “dominar o passado” podem ser vistas como um fracasso e uma conquista, tornando apropriado falar de uma “gestão culpada” em curso, que inclui não só a Alemanha, mas a Europa como um todo.

Palavras-chave: Terrorismo. Cinema alemão. Fração do Exército Vermelho. Trauma. Fassbinder.

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