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1.

Witnessing Terrorism

MULDER: What's wrong?

SCULLY: Well, I just climbed up twelve floors, I'm hot, I'm thirsty and to be honest, I'm wondering what I'm doing up here.

MULDER: You're looking for a bomb.

SCULLY: Yes, I know that, but the threat was called in to the federal building across the street.

MULDER: I think they have that covered.

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.¹

This book is about how terrorism is witnessed, spectacularized, interpreted and remembered. It is about what happens after horrific and spectacular images of terrorism are captured by the global news media and distributed to audiences of witnesses. In this book, I want to map a path that begins with violent acts of terrorism and ends with *terror on the screen*. This pathway is littered with witnesses both near and far from terrorism's "flashpoint",² popular, tele-visual and screen cultures involving political satire and counter-cultures, traumascaping, a terror-voyeurism that is akin to watching pornography, the news media and its news junkies, and furious bloggers spewing vitriol and racism. On this pathway I found many things. Saviors of humanity named Morpheus and Neo. Terror celebrities and celebrity cultures. Six friends having coffee in Manhattan. Post-9/11 cartoons that encourage us to laugh at the post-9/11 world. Cylons. A posse of sexy secret agents. A porn-star named Jenna Jamison and a place called "Imaginationland" where our imaginations were targeted by terrorists, and subsequently ran wild. These are all important artifacts of a post-9/11 screen culture.

This book is also, in many respects, about the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington DC and a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It is about some of the extraordinary consequences of these attacks. "9/11" entered the world as an image – a spectacle – for many millions of people throughout the world. Many millions witnessed the attacks in real-time, live on television. As the consequences of 9/11 have endured in international wars fought in its name, in acts of brutality and torture, in further acts of terrorism, in politics and elections, so too have the spectacular images of 9/11. These images have been replayed incessantly, routinely reanimated on television and computer screens, and 9/11 has quickly become one of the most witnessed events in tele-visual history. These images, and their consequences, have endured.

This endurance has coincided with considerable efforts to understand, research, explore, evaluate, quantify, qualify and gain knowledge about 9/11. This book is one such effort, but it is not one that is routinely attempted. It is far more likely that those who write books about terrorism will focus on the who, why, how and when of terrorism than on how terrorism is *witnessed, spectacularized, interpreted and remembered*. It is perhaps even less likely that the subject of a book about terrorism would be popular, tele-visual and screen cultures. As Special Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully stand atop the wrong building, searching for a terrorist bomb that is not supposed to be there, they gain a different perspective, they work against the prescribed method and course of action, they invert many of the assumptions that have been made about terrorism and terrorists. Standing on the wrong building, "playing a hunch", can have its advantages.

Like Mulder, I followed a "hunch". I became aware of a 9/11 that I had not immediately seen, that I did not witness (at first), that I had trouble categorizing. I witnessed 9/11 live on television. I witnessed the news coverage in the days that followed. The images were spectacular and horrific – I felt an uncomfortable combination of disgust, a type of grotesque excitement and an overwhelming discomfort at the sight of the death and destruction. The whole event was drowned out with images. Soon after, I witnessed comedy talk shows return to the air. I witnessed David Letterman's and John Stewart's emotional accounts of 9/11. I witnessed popular television shows, some set in New York City, return to the air. But these television programs betrayed any hope of a quick return to normal. When *Friends* returned for the eighth season in late September 2001 something was missing. It took me a few moments to process the reality that the Twin Towers, which had once littered the background images of the opening credits and the scene transitions, were gone. Other situation comedies set in New York City followed suit. What interested me most was that despite the removal of the Twin Towers, life in these television programs, the lives of the fictional characters living in NYC, continued uninterrupted. It was as though 9/11 had never happened. Simply and quietly the Twin Towers were airbrushed out of the shot, as though their disappearance had not been dramatic and globally witnessed, as though the Towers slipped away in the night. Other programs tackled

9/11 head-on. The *West Wing* featured a post-9/11 storyline. *Battlestar Galactica* was re-imagined in a post-9/11 world. And it was not long before feature films about 9/11 were commonplace in the world's cinemas. Indeed, it was not long until *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park* even had us laughing at the post-9/11 world.

Some might say that this is not the best way to understand the meanings and consequences of 9/11. Perhaps I am standing on the wrong building. But I do so in the hope of finding something new, something different, something that has been dismissed as less interesting or less important. I want to show that the ways that terrorism is witnessed, spectacularized, interpreted and remembered is important. I want to show that popular, tele-visual and screen cultures are important artifacts of the post-9/11 world. In standing on the wrong building I am not alone, nor am I the first. In fact, I am in good company. The prominent terrorism studies academic Walter Laqueur observed in 1987 that "Fiction holds some promise for the understanding of the terrorist phenomenon".³ In arguing his case for taking fiction and popular culture seriously, he warned of the rigidity of "the study of terrorism as practiced by political scientists" but called for care in moving from a study of terrorism as a "science" towards the study of terrorism through the "arts".⁴ Such a move, in Laqueur's view, represents a transition from the realm of "relative certainties" to the "realm of impression".⁵ These "impressions" are undoubtedly important. As John Tulloch – a media academic and a victim of the London "7/7" bombings – argued, media representations of terrorism play a vital social and cultural role after a terrorist attack. He writes of screen cultures after 7/7; "whatever public channel of communication they adopt, they are all important, vocal parts of a groundswell of alternative political voices ... They all engage directly with ... an international culture of fear ... [and] are asking questions about an alternative democracy of ethical responsibility and civic engagement".⁶

For Laqueur the movement from relative certainty to the realm of impression promises to make some absences in the study of terrorism presences, whilst making current presences absent. Whilst my book will offer little to improve knowledge of how terrorist attacks can be prevented, how terrorists become radicalized and how they might be rehabilitated, it will illuminate other fields where terrorism studies knowledge is lacking. Examining popular, tele-visual and screen cultures of terrorism in the post-9/11 world can tell us much about how terrorism is represented, produced and re-produced and how terrorism is *witnessed* throughout the world. By making traditional fields of counterterrorism and terrorism research less visible, I bring the experience of terrorism's witnesses to the foreground.

I seek to highlight witnessing by making popular, tele-visual and screen cultures of terrorism more visible. In doing so I want to signal some important signposts of post-9/11 screen culture. These signposts are necessarily contextual and situated, and dependent upon the vantage point of every witness. But 9/11's witnesses also have much in common. My goal is to find "new and adequate ways of thinking of, about and for the world we live in"⁷, a world that can indefinitely be described as *post-9/11*. But before I outline how I will tackle the post-9/11 screen cultural artifacts I have chosen for analysis in this book, I want to show how the role of the witness has always been an underlying concern for understanding our world and for understanding terrorism. The witness is central to any understanding of terrorism, although this is seldom acknowledged. But, as I will show in the next section, the witness has played a central role in the history of terrorism and in attempts to settle on a terrorism definition. The witness, in this way, is the first and most important absence I want to highlight and draw into presence.

The Witness

The witness is the central figure of this book. I base my arguments in this book on the assumption that to witness terrorism is to be a victim of terrorism since, as Jenkins has argued, terrorists want a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead.⁸ Those who watch, those who bear witness, are the intended targets of terrorism. Those who die in terrorist attacks are means to an end in the terrorists' desire for attention and celebrity. For Haraway⁹ the witness

holds a paradoxically powerful and vulnerable place in the social and cultural world. The foundation of witnessing for Haraway is being a part of a “collective”, “networked” and “situated” visual practice:

Witnessing is seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one’s visions and representations. Witnessing is a collective, limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility of those who do it, all of whom are mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disowned desires and fears.¹⁰

As a witness and researcher of 9/11, I inhabit the many stories of 9/11 that I encounter in the post-9/11 world. I inhabit the story of participating in a reading group on the seventh anniversary of 9/11 and the momentarily threatening passenger airplane flying near Melbourne’s skyline. I inhabit George W. Bush’s address to the American people on the same anniversary. I inhabit the television programs that feature images and imagery of 9/11, terrorism, security and fear. And I am not the only one.

The witnessing that I explore in this book has been formed through partial connections, complex relationships and problematic fusions between witnesses and audiences and popular, tele-visual and screen cultures. Donna Haraway has described situations where such multiple connections form with the metaphor of the “cat’s cradle” game in which participants make “string figures” on fingers.¹¹

Cat’s cradle is about patterns and knots; the game takes great skill and can result in some serious surprises. One person can build up a large repertoire of string figures on a single pair of hands, but the cat’s cradle figures can be passed back and forth on hands of several players, who add new moves in the building of complex patterns. Cat’s cradle invites a sense of collective work, of one person not being able to make all the patterns alone ... It is not always possible to repeat interesting patterns, and figuring out what happened to result in intriguing patterns is an embodied analytical skill.¹²

I intend to play a type of cat’s cradle game in this book in order to uncover patterns of 9/11, terrorism, security and fear in post-9/11 screen cultures. Joining me in this endeavor are a variety of figures in the post-9/11 world that include human respondents in social research in Melbourne, Australia; respondents to newspaper articles and terror-events in the blogosphere; television shows, films and those who have written about them; the characters in these shows and films; fashion photographers; techniques of social research and the associated methods; literary traditions of critical social theory; and the people I encounter and speak to about 9/11 and terrorism when I am at work, at home, in the city, and traveling the world.

Valid witnessing depends not only on modesty but also on nurturing and acknowledging alliances with a lively array of others, who are like and unlike, human and not, inside and outside what have been the defended boundaries of hegemonic selves and powerful places.¹³

Witnessing is a crucial force for understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism. Witnessing is embodied, situated and located and it is through witnesses that we discover that “Understanding the world is about living inside stories”.¹⁴

Witnessing is, however, a deeply problematic phenomenon. It is a differing, subjective and dependent experience. The unreliability of our visual skills has the potential to make a study of witnessing a study of conjecture. Vision is an “embodied” practice that makes witnessing possible.¹⁵ But our over reliance on our problematic visual capacity – a visual capacity that, according to cognitive and neuro-scientific explanations, functions through the eyes first capturing stimuli that is then interpreted by the brain where some things are emphasized and other things are ignored – means that we have trusted our vision to “leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere”.¹⁶ As Haraway so powerfully puts it:

The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power. The instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodern culture have compounded these meanings of dis-embodiment. The visualizing technologies are without apparent limit; the eye of any ordinary primate like us can be endlessly enhanced by sonography systems, magnetic resonance imaging, artificial intelligence-linked graphic manipulation systems, scanning electron microscopes, computer-aided tomography scanners, colour enhancement techniques, satellite surveillance systems, home and office VDTs, a camera for every purpose.¹⁷

This visual “technological feast” has armed the witness with the tools to indulge in visually “unregulated gluttony” where “all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice”.¹⁸ On and after 9/11 this has translated to a capacity to witness, capture, record, and replay over and over again 9/11, other acts of terror and their consequences. Witnessing 9/11 and other acts of contemporary terror are little more than a Google away. Moreover, this visual capturing and replaying – or *re-animating* – has made post-9/11 screen culture possible. John Urry has seemingly picked up on this theme in relating visualized screen culture and the 9/11 terrorist attacks:

The whole world watched the surreal moment as planes with live passengers flew into and demolished two of the largest buildings in the world. The World Trade Center, a city in the air, was with two strokes bombed out of existence, an “uncanny” moment when the distinction between fantasy and reality was effaced in astonishing images, eclipsing anything Hollywood has generated.¹⁹

What these forces – witnessing, the dominance of the visual sense, and the ability to capture and record imagery – amount to are the coordinates of a victimized audience in the theater of terrorism. This is who we are; imperfect human actors with unreliable visual capacities that do more to foster conjecture than accurate or unified perceptions. Perhaps our best hope is to understand as many stories as possible. Indeed, these imperfect human actors are the true targets of terrorism. They are the receivers and responders to the terrorist’s violent message. The witness of terrorism has always played a central role in understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism, even if that role has tended to lay hidden in terrorism scholarship and analysis. It is to this scholarship that I now turn.

Witnesses in the Theater of Terrorism

Many writers and scholars in the “terrorism studies” canon have argued that terrorism has changed significantly throughout history in terms of methods and tactics, the targets and the victims chosen, the ideology that drives the attacks, and the way that the word “terrorism” has been used.²⁰ What it means to be a witness and a victim of terrorism has also changed significantly, but some consistency nonetheless remains – the more spectacular the act of terrorism, the greater the audience of witnesses in the theater of terrorism. Walter Laqueur once argued that terrorism “has been a tragedy for the victims, but seen in an historical perspective it seldom has been more than a nuisance”.²¹ But the terrorism of 9/11 and many other post-9/11 attacks call this claim into question. What Laqueur’s argument fails to adequately account for is the role of the image in generating spectacular terrorism that is witnessed large distances from terrorism’s *flashpoint*.

Indeed, a close inspection of the literature exploring the history of terrorism shows that terrorists have always held the “witness” as the highest priority. What it also reveals is that goals such as political change, ideological upheaval or religious influence have often been secondary goals to the ultimate desire to have people watch the violence. Yet, when witnesses watch, these secondary goals are advanced by the spectacular terrorism image-event. Because of

this, I suggest that the term “victim” is often misunderstood in the terrorism studies literature. Often, exploring the meaning of the “victims” of terrorism amounts to an uncritical reference to those who perish or who are injured in an act of terrorism and their families. But these “victims” of terrorism are instruments to achieving the greater goal of publicity and reaching audiences of witnesses. Terrorism has always been theater for the living. Terror groups such as the *Sicarii*, the *Hashashin* and the *Thuggee* – groups that did not have the ability to generate spectacular tele-visual events – were able to create violent *imagery* in the minds of witnesses. Stories about their violent attacks quickly spread and instilled terror in anyone who heard the tales both near to and far from where their attacks occurred.²² The *Sicarii* were an extreme Jewish faction that became active in the first century CE during the Roman occupation of Palestine. Their tactic was to attack in the crowds that gathered during holidays and religious festivals. Their targets were mostly moneylenders, priests and other Jews that they believed were collaborating with the occupying Romans.²³ Their ostensible goal was to overthrow Roman rule and establish self-governance. Their method for achieving this was to spread terror and fear amongst witnesses. Their attention seeking terror was often combined with organized guerrilla attacks launched against strategic Roman positions from *Sicarii* camps and strongholds in the countryside. The crowds in which the killings took place became frenzied as news of *Sicarii* attacks spread. The *Sicarii* desired publicity for their cause and were successful in inspiring an uprising. The historian Josephus wrote that the “*Sicarii* committed murders in broad daylight in the heart of Jerusalem”.²⁴ News of their exploits often travelled to distant audiences.

The *Hashashin* were a radical Muslim sect that targeted rulers and religious leaders that they believed were corrupt. The *Hashashin* were responsible for the deaths of many prominent religious figures and leaders.²⁵ In 1090, the *Hashashin* seized the fortress of Alamut and, several years later, completed assassinations of the Sultan of Baghdad, Nazim al Mulq, Count Raymond II of Tripoli and Marquis Conrad of Montferrat, ruler of Jerusalem.²⁶ They became well known in many regions for carrying out bold and brazen attacks against high profile targets and for their supposed love of the drug hashish. It was popularly believed that the assassins would get high on the drug before embarking on a mission, although accounts on this differ. The *Hashashin* carried out assassinations to achieve their various political goals, but they were also concerned with attracting witnesses and gaining publicity. Rapoport has argued that they did not need mass communication and media to reach witnesses in distant locations.²⁷ Their prominent “victims” were murdered “in venerated sites and royal courts” on holy days and during festivals to guarantee that there would be many witnesses and that word of their actions and purpose would spread. In this way, they posed a physical threat to those who were their targets and an emotional and psychological threat to all who heard the tales and accepted the imagery created by the stories that were told of their violence. Some *Hashashin* terrorists, after carrying out an assassination, would remain and accept their inevitable fate as guards and soldiers struck them down. This defied reason for witnesses to their violence and for those who heard the tales.²⁸ Stories of the *Hashashin*’s violence reached fantastic heights. As these stories and their notoriety spread they became deeply feared.

The *Thuggee* first became active in the seventh century and were particularly well-known for their violent attacks during the thirteenth century in what is present-day India.²⁹ The *Thuggee* were not attempting to influence any group. Rather, they were committing murders they believed satisfied their deity: the Hindu goddess Kali.³⁰ The *Thugs* were not directly motivated by a desire to attract witnesses or gain publicity. Their terror was not carried out to achieve a greater goal and audiences of witnesses. Their violence was an end in itself. They nonetheless generated powerful terror and audiences of witnesses who heard of tales of the *Thuggee*. News of their attacks spread far and wide and, like the *Hashashin*, their violence, which involved ritual desecrations of their “victims”, was perceived to be appalling and irrational. The spectacle of *Thuggee* terrorism generated enduring folklore and legend.³¹ The terrorisms of these groups were indeed powerful. The fact that they are still discussed in journals and books is testament to their influence.

Whilst only the eye-witnesses to attacks carried out by these groups *literally* viewed the violence, the stories of Sicarii, Hashashin and Thuggee terror spread their message to a wider audience with terrifying and powerful imagery. In the 21st century the message and the desire to gain attention remains relatively unchanged but the method of dissemination has changed significantly. Internet and satellite communication technologies allowed the 9/11 terrorist attacks to gain an audience not just through storytelling but as a spectacular, globalized image-event. But 9/11 and these historical moments of terror share the capacity of terrorism to attract an audience, a watcher, a witness. However, in much of the literature examining terrorism the techniques, tactics, the perpetrators and their motivations are – understandably – the emphasis. Far too little scholarly endeavor has focused on the role of witnesses who are the targets of terrorism. The comparative silence in examining the role of the witness in understanding terrorism is especially evident in literature that defines terrorism.