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Intersections: What is the current climate in
which we work and live?

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Abstract

For many, the events of 11 September 2001 predisposed Western societies to collective fear not dissimilar to that felt at other moments of crisis in history. A few years on, the shockwaves have flattened and the notion of terror has institutionalised fear on several levels: the emotional, the social and the political. Fear, it seems, justifies varying degrees of administrative arbitrariness; as long as there is a commonly acknowledged threat like terrorism, public opinion (when informed by fear rather than knowledge) can be swayed to overlook the politicised abuse of the law. The protection of law from arbitrariness and from the fear that makes arbitrariness possible is, then, a pressing issue in the current climate. This paper explores intersections of visual culture and a general rhetoric of terror as myth-making processes to see how these translate into public opinion. First I examine some historical evidence for the political management of fear in Socratic philosophy, while the second part looks at visual and literal rhetoric.

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Introduction

For many, the events of 11 September 2001 predisposed Western societies to collective fear not dissimilar to that felt at other moments of crisis in history. A few years on, the shockwaves have flattened and the notion of terror has institutionalised fear on several levels: the emotional, the social and the political. Fear, it seems, justifies varying degrees of administrative arbitrariness; as long as there is a commonly acknowledged threat like terrorism, public opinion (when informed by fear rather than knowledge) can be swayed to overlook the politicised abuse of the law. The protection of law from arbitrariness and from the fear that makes arbitrariness possible is, then, a pressing issue in the current climate.

This paper explores intersections of visual culture and a general rhetoric of terror as myth-making processes to see how these translate into public opinion. First I examine some historical evidence for the political management of fear in Socratic philosophy, while the second part looks at visual and literal rhetoric.

In the third part of this paper I consider artworks that employ creativity as catharsis with particular reference to the exhibition at which the artwork featured in this edition of *Law Text Culture* was originally shown: *Tactics Against Fear — Creativity as Catharsis*, in the Long Gallery of the Faculty of Creative Arts (FCA) at the University of Wollongong in September 2007. To foster interdisciplinary collaboration, all FCA staff and postgraduate students (including creative writers, journalists, composers, musicians, actors, designers and visual artists) responded to the *rhetoric of fear* around the ‘war on terror’. Artists and scholars addressed the notion of fear as a result of the existing rhetoric of terror after terrorist attacks such as those of

September 11 in the USA, or the bombings in Madrid, London and Bali, by responding to the question: *What is the current climate in which we work and live?*

These considerations led to a number of questions: If the scholar has a 'specific public role in society', as Edward Said insisted (Wallen 1998: 215), how can (s)he creatively connect with issues that affect society? Is (s)he, as Said would say, endowed 'with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public' (Wallen 1998: 215)?

Two central aspects emerged for me as curator: first the locale, not necessarily an *Archimedian point*, from which the exploration would depart — namely working within an authoritative institution, the FCA. The second aspect was to take a more personal position within such a symbol of relative power in the broader social landscape and inquire how one relatively powerless individual can operate in this new social and legal landscape.

This exhibition queried tactics *of* and *against* terror through diverse methods of exploration. At the same time, this positioning reflected on creative processes from one particular location — the institutional space. This site of relative power played a significant part in the conceptual phase of the curatorial process; the faculty as a building became a platform for interdisciplinary discussion about the tactics of fear. In this sense, buildings are inscriptions on our social and political landscape and, as such, can provide alternative modes to popular narratives. The signification of buildings such as academic institutions is articulated through their assigned authority over knowledge and thought. How does this affect *creative-led research practice* of the people operating *within* and *through* such a space of authority? If responsibility comes with privilege, what comments could be made to counterbalance the acquiescent attitude of fear, which ultimately is instrumental to political aims and the possible politicised abuse of law?

Political management of fear

To investigate the visual and literal rhetoric surrounding the notions of terror and fear, both terms need more clarifying for the context of this paper. The Latin word *terror, ris m.* means fright, terror, but also shock and panic. Mary Zournazi sees the meaning of the term as overtly political since the ‘war on terror’ symbolises ‘the charge against disorder ... as well as the employment of methods’ that are to inhibit ‘terror as a means of social control’ (Zournazi 2007: 165). In this paper, the term ‘terror’ is interpreted as affliction coming from outside; the term ‘fear’ on the other hand is the individual or collective *reaction* to terror; something that is felt and developed from within the individual body or the body politic. In this sense, terror as the ultimate fear of death is a physical affliction, while fear is the anticipation of it. The paralysing component of terror has a strong psychological and emotional power of ethereal dimensions and was recognised as such a force long ago.

For example, in the course of Greek history, the arts gave fear (otherwise an abstract of the unspeakable or inconceivable) a name and a face. In fact, the process of empathy in drama, poetry, sculpture and painting often revitalised and reconstituted primal fears, such as those of suffering, pain and death, as depicted in Homer’s *Odyssey* or Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Sometimes these creative devices helped to generate new fear, like that of the law. Unsurprisingly, fear management was a pillar of the Athenian republic — crucial only, as Socrates recognised (according to Plato), was how and where to channel this potential energy as a political instrument. In ancient Greece, legal frameworks were to provide management of fear in the service of public interest as opposed to fear that is random, irate and an uncontrolled destroyer of the status quo. Accordingly, Socrates argued in Plato’s *Republic* for the banishment of fear for the sake of the warrior’s morale; in order to be victorious in battle, a man had to fear the loss of virtue and freedom more than death itself. Socrates’ vision was thus not erasure but the channelling of fear in a manner conducive to the common good. All poetic narratives of death, according to Socrates, should

be censored. He suggested, for example, stripping Homer's epic of Achilles' lamentations (Plato 1999: Book 3).

This management of fear in the public interest and to promote political purposes has continued to serve politics in the twenty-first century. Political discourse does not seek solutions as to how to erase fear but how to use and manage it. Robin asserts that fear is an exemplary instrument of repression which, in the shape of political fear, 'arises from conflicts within and between societies' (Robin 2004: 1).

The initial broad support among Americans and some Western nations for the 'war on terror', and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq, can be linked to the successful political management of fear after September 11. A form of mass-hypnosis, effected by the repetition of imagery of the collapsing twin towers of the World Trade Centre on a daily basis over a period of months, told us to be afraid. (Interestingly, images of the crashed plane in Pennsylvania or, more significantly, the partial destruction of the Pentagon — the nerve centre of America's intelligence — were few and far between by comparison.)

As a consequence, one could say, a lack of objectivity clouded public and individual opinion; and as Erich Fromm recognised in the rhetoric of nations as 'self and other', 'another nation is made out to be utterly depraved and fiendish, while one's own nation stands for everything that is good and noble' (Fromm 1956: 120–1). In the 'age of terrorism' the war between nations seems to be grouped in the dichotomous narration of the world's violent activities of the twenty-first century into 'terrorism' and 'counterstrikes'. Currently, the adversary, from a Western point of view, is not necessarily part of another nation but shrouded in the generic mantle of Islamic fundamentalism.

The connection between fear management and changes in legislation can be seen in the responses to marginalised people who fit the iconic images of fear — the bearded Muslim, the Middle Eastern man, as well as institutions such as detention centres. Surveillance cameras in most public spaces and an increase in control of customs officers are tolerated. This has impacted on many aspects of culture. For

example, some art production is less autonomous and more entangled in trans-cultural relations. Any international art activities demand a careful selection of exhibition works, in terms of both their type of storage and the meaning they convey.

Visual culture and the rhetoric of terror

In visual culture we find that the language of terror permeates all mass media, and has become a rhetorical tool to normalise the state of fear. By *language of terror* I refer to terrorist acts and their public discourse, but also the literal language used in imagery such as feature films. Through our resultant emotional landscapes these intertwining threads of terrorist acts, rhetoric of terror and against terror, and the continual visual and textual terror narratives, have knotted a web of apprehension – a web that infiltrates not only the visual, but also the discursive as well as the legislative landscape. Irit Rogoff defines visual culture and its power relation with the viewer as an ‘entire world of intertextuality’; that is, ‘images, sounds and spatial delineations are read onto and through one another’ thereby producing ‘layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, building ...’ (2002: 24).

In terms of the increasingly binary perception of the new world order, the Christian/Western versus Islamic world and vice versa (Radosh 2002, Said 2002b), the notion of terror is an elementary tool in Islamic fundamentalist attempts at subversion of Western hegemonic notions of history, such as those discussed by Edward Said (2002b, 2003). Simultaneously, the use of terror is the key strategy in the capitalist-fundamentalist affirmation of existing Western hegemonic economic power structures (Aburish 1997, Chomsky 2002, 2005). In its aim to affect public opinion and forge foreign policies that affirm the provincialism of nationhood rather than global dialogue, terror is the target *and* the weapon, and is concurrently method and rhetoric of those who are waging ‘war *through* terror’ and those who are waging ‘war *against* terror’, as seen in the strategies of the US, Australia and the UK since 11 September 2001.

Governments such as those of Britain, the USA and Australia have tapped into the energy flow of fear and the tolerance for arbitrariness which was generated by media coverage and popular visual culture immediately after the attacks of September 11, and have used this as fuel for legal changes, such as the *US Patriot Act* 2001. This led to the definition of a 'terrorist act' in the *Security Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) Act* 2002 and the *Anti-Terrorism Act (No 2)* 2005 and reconsideration of the *Migration Act* 1958 (Cth) in Australia, for example (Watts 2006: 224, Coulter-Smith & Owen 2005: 8, Astore 2006: 246–7).

Chomsky (2002) shows that the definition of what constitutes a terrorist act or pre-emptive strike is power-related. On the one side, violent acts such as the suicide bombings in Israel and elsewhere are instrumental to force debates around injustices and hierarchical and historical divisions in the Palestinian question. On the other side these violent acts and others are used as tactics by some Western governments to induce public consent and legal change. Both are effectively strategies to mute the debate on global politics in broader terms. In other words, the notion of terror as a political tool is not only affecting our personal space or how we perceive the world around us; it is increasingly affecting the scope of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard.

Some of the 'tactics' against terror put in place in Australian law since 2001 demonstrate the literal language of terror. It is articulated in response to terrorist attacks like suicide bombings, for example, and countered by surveillance, change of constitutional rights, change of human rights, torture, detention centres and imprisonment without trial. '[T]he laws are rapidly evolving and can change in the course of the case,' explained barrister Philip Boulten SC (2006) at the opening of Sydney artist Debra Dawes's exhibition *Cover Up/Terror Wars* in 2006: 'If the government is unhappy about the way the law is being interpreted, it will be changed — sometimes overnight — in a way which seemingly overcomes perceived difficulties with the prosecution case'. There are the amendments to the *Telecommunications (Interception)*

Act 1979 (Cth) that allow the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to intercept lawyer/client communication when the charges are terrorism-related. Boulten (2006) explains that an account of the post–September 11 reality in Australia sounds like the description of a tyrannical state, outside the Western concept of democracy: citizens can be held in detention for weeks without even a suspicion of having committed a crime; coercion to answer questions, being tracked by electronic surveillance devices and telephone tapping are now in the national interest (Boulten 2006).

The language of all media of our visual culture (newspaper, film, photography and digitalised imagery, art and design) appear to be in tandem with these developments in Australian law. Organs of popular culture, such as film and television, are simultaneously donor and recipient of this new climate of post–September 11.

Examples for this are played out on prime-time US television shows such as *NCIS*, *24*, *JAG*, and *Lost*, which seem to be increasingly overstepping the threshold of what was once conceived as moderate violence towards open torture as a means to an end — not by the terrorist or the ‘bad guy’ but the ‘good guy’. Traditional boundaries between good and bad, and the Hollywoodian black and white narrative, have become blurred and the viewer is left to stomach the vague discomfort of moral confusion over whatever and whoever is conceived as the opponent or the *other*.

Over the last six years implements of fear such as terrorist attacks, war and new legislation have created a sense of hyper-reality which is not necessarily based on factual evidence. Often emotional responses impede rational behaviour and are the basis of rather mythical constructs: an indication of the intersecting of visual culture (images of bombed twin towers on television) and rhetoric of terror (some discourse on terror attacks) as myth-making processes of popular culture.

It is this larger-than-life notion that fear induces in the aftermath of harrowing events that helps to create myth, a body of ‘knowledge’ from which a nation or government can draw as a source of renewal in

times of crisis. 'Myths', explains John Girling (1993), 'are emotionally charged beliefs' which are 'symbolic representations of reality'. These myths 'contain incorrect assumptions' yet are genuinely felt reactions to critical social conditions or 'crises of modernity' (Girling 1993: 2).

In Australia, myth-making takes place in the way symbolic terms such as 'terror' are being used not only in daily language, news headlines and broadcast media, but also in visual culture: television advertisement segments are calling on civic duty, the responsibility of the viewer being to 'help protect Australia from terrorism'.

Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen dedicated their 2005 publication *Art in the Age of Terrorism* to the 'innocent people who have suffered in the struggle between governments and terrorism'. It appears that innocent people can be used as involuntary instruments of political ambitions as soon as continual visual and textual narratives of who and what perpetrates terror have reached symbolic character — then assumed knowledge of terrorism becomes iconic. After September 11, certain insignia of Islam like the chador or the beard can be read as part of a chain of association that is linked to the notion of terror. This crude imagery is gradually ingrained in the body in the form of fear. Foucault has stated that 'knowledge has anatomo-physiological conditions' (Foucault 1970: 320). 'Knowledge of terrorism' likewise inhabits the body. At the same time, myth- and fact-based knowledge, generated by text or image and cultivated on fear, merge and are eventually consigned to public memory.

This kind of public memory, then, built on individual responses, generates a more or less unifying public opinion based on fear. Despite all the differences, one issue unites humanity: nobody wants to fall victim to terrorism. How fear justifies changes in legislation and ultimately governs executive sectors of society can be seen in the adapting condition of democratic and humanist processes in Western society after 11 September 2001. The implementation of the rhetoric of terror as political method has corrupted ethics as a part of political power. What happens to the foundations of democracy and its value systems in this climate of suspicion and alert? It is fear, argues

Corey Robin, 'which today makes the greatest mockery of those principles' (2004: 252). While terror prompts action, fear also mutes human processes, such as exchange and dialogue within and across boundaries. Visual presence of terror in the mass media keeps fear in focus. By considering popular visual media as part of visual culture and their relation to the rhetoric of terror as a pillar of political fear management, I want to turn to possibilities of alternative readings and representations.

Tactics Against Fear – Creativity as Catharsis

Since 2001 artists have explored the notion of terror in various ways: some have responded to the effects of terrorism on society, like Zanny Begg (Gelber: 194, 202–4); some have explored the rhetoric of terror (Mireille Astore 2005, 2006); and others have employed the tactics of terror to deconstruct the idea of a divide between the ethical and the aesthetic (Coulter-Smith & Owen 2005: 21).

As Boulten (2006) has pointed out, Australian artist Debra Dawes, in the exhibition *Cover up/Terror Wars* (2006) at the Gallery Barry Keldoulis in Sydney, used the visual implement of warfare — *camouflage* — to uncover the machinations of political rhetoric as disguise of the real meanings of political messages and double agendas. In another exhibition, *Paranoia* (2006–7) at the Freud Museum in Hampstead, UK, artists related to contemporary socio-political fears and phobias, and some artists, such as Sydney artist Mireille Astore, challenged general assumptions about race, gender and class by disrupting their associated popular iconography.

These examples show that Socratic censorship cannot prevail — that debating fear creatively can be — at any given time, at any given place — a cathartic exercise for both artist and audience by reclaiming fear from the political to the personal.

Coming from a creative rather than a scientific, legal or historical position, the artworks in the exhibition *Tactics Against Fear — Creativity as Catharsis* explored today's popular visual culture from various angles. But the underlying common notion was that language — spoken,

written, imaged or performed — can be formative in the development of fear. In that sense, the exhibition investigated notions of fear as a result of the current rhetoric of terror in the realm of visual culture. The artists have also explored how the vector of *fear*, as often used in popular *visual culture*, can be inverted and used for the deconstructing and decoding of its own rhetoric.

The Aristotelian aim in tragedy is *catharsis* — that is, to cleanse the mind through the experience of pity and terror (Aristotle 1907: §2–4). Who exactly it was directed at is still debated. Is catharsis, or *cleansing*, to be had by the audience, or the actors, or both?

Some artists such as Juilee Pryor responded to the climate of fear in a very personal, reflective way through avenues of aesthetic formalism which empowered them and their audience to engage with fear. By contrast, others such as Christine Howe directly invited an audience response that queried the machinations of the current rhetoric of fear in the media, by asking us to play with language and poetically rewrite headlines and news. Surveillance technology, privacy invasion and ‘hands-free espionage’ were critiqued in Noa Price’s assemblage of computer parts on canvas, while the mythologising factor in the processes of institutionalising memory was laid bare in other works by Mehmet Adil and Brogan Bunt. Breaking through fear by looking at the spaces unoccupied by connotation and symbolic power, Annette Tzavaras’ work was an exploration of personal experiences in the field of artistic and cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Australia, Dubai, Palestine and Afghanistan.

Mehmet Adil’s installation work *Terror of History History of Terror (TOHHOT)*, made of bread, text and a cello-bow, was a visual unit and part of a larger work in progress. Held by a bent coat-hanger, an old cello-bow, hovering at the top like a maestro, seemed to conduct the choir of bread assembled below. The assemblage of familiar (found) objects was serious yet playful at the same time. The words burnt onto the flat round bread seemed to invite a direct connection with current political issues by association with the material, but there was another level to it. The words written on the transient material of bread question

the predominant logo-centric attention in Western knowledge as conveyor of truths; in other words, the power of the written word to document, comment upon, disseminate, evaluate and construct knowledge has suddenly a use-by date by replacing paper with bread. Over the duration of the exhibition, the viewer witnessed the slow deterioration of the bread and the fading of words. The ephemeral nature of the installation was Adil's subtle jab at symbolism, meaning and association of materials. The viewer was compelled to find other possibilities of what the work meant, perhaps more personal ones, and not to see it as representational or cognitive sources of knowledge. Bread is ingested and words are swallowed and what remains is the memory of the taste of a specific moment in time.

In a similar way, the conventional habits of reading were disrupted in the poetic works by Christine Howe. As a writer and poet she invited the audience to become actively involved in the deconstruction of the fear-inducing power of printed news. A pile of newspaper articles on the topic of terrorism was the raw material for the audience to 'turn newspaper headings into poetry, and thus to interrogate and reclaim words used in the media that generate fear' (Howe 2007). To counter the attack of headlines, she suggested re-constructing the verbal violence into poetry. Instead of absorbing the news passively, she offered the reader a creative conduit to break the spell of the rhetoric of terror, healing the fear by disempowering the written word. Howe's work granted a degree of active intervention to the viewer. Her poetic work commented on the encoded meaning of words as used in political rhetoric, in particular the key words used in the 'war on terror'; it was in some ways also a process of uncovering deception through the misuse of language.

Predominantly personal experiences of fear were explored in works by Juilee Pryor and Sue Blanchfield. Pryor's black and white photographs verged on the 'sublime', a place where beauty and terror co-habit equally. Her works had a haunted overtone, leaving the viewer guessing as to what the objects in the images were. Lines and contours were blurred in the mist of night and the objects themselves

did not seem to be actually there, but rather their 'ghosts'. Her images offered an escape from the rhetoric of terror and from fear by looking at beauty as a cathartic moment in time. She simultaneously questioned the authenticity or truths narrated in visual representations. Similar to Adil's piece, Pryor relied in her work on the viewer's association with the material and visual language; at the same time, the medium became evidence in the process of deconstructing meaning.

Sue Blanchfield, a textile artist, explored fear through the events of the London bombings of July 2005 by looking at the dynamics behind the familiar — like daily train trips to work — which reassure us of a kind of normality through routine despite the possibility of violent disruption. To her, this one incident had 'changed the experience of travel on the Underground' (Blanchfield 2007). Routine, as a mechanism for coping with fear, 'erase[s] the one act of terrorism' (Blanchfield 2007) for millions of commuters — from all kinds of religious, political, cultural and social backgrounds — who stand or sit side by side, day in, day out, in meditation and complacency. However, Blanchfield's work showed that this complacency was not shared by the ones who could not draw from the same routine; for her as a temporary resident at the time, familiarity could not kick in. Instead, Blanchfield countered her own claustrophobic experience during such trips by making fragments of those journeys familiar to her: the upholstery in the Underground (one of the constants on such trips) became her escape route. The simple method of focusing on the patterns of the fabric and the blurred motion helped her to relax. Her digital prints of the upholstery designs, *The Underground* (2006), were resonant of the lulling yet cathartic qualities of continuous repetition, where the recognition of pattern in the fabric renders a sense of familiarity.

Pryor and Blanchfield communicate ideas which extend representational knowledge, returning agency and responsibility to the viewer. Meaning in these photographic documentations or presentations is not self-evident — images, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright assert, 'do not embody truth, but always rely on context and interpretation for their meanings' (2005: 290).

Brogan Bunt's exploration of the question 'How can the current "war on terror" be visually and conceptually represented?' led away from the familiar iconic images in mass media (explosions, beards and chadors, beheadings, wrecked towns, caskets and so on). Instead he invited the audience to uncover mechanisms behind the symbolic language of our visual culture and to dethrone, in the process, the monocratic visual meaning-making of mega-narratives and the illusion of their authenticity and authority.

To conclude: laws do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they fixed; laws are exposed to public scrutiny and their viability is checked against the needs of the individual, of the nation and of society. The relation of fear to law goes back to Plato, as noted earlier. In the current climate of fear, the need to feel safe is channelled into changes in law. This paper has looked at visual culture and a general rhetoric of terror and how they may act as underlying currents of such sentiments in society. Artistic intervention into the battlefield of popular visual culture, a territory commonly occupied by mass media, is an attempt to query and to understand a rapidly shifting world.

The outcome of *Tactics Against Fear — Creativity as Catharsis* was to peel away the layers of fear and to disentangle tactics of fear through creative cathartic activity. The artistic approach aimed at an exploration of the senses. Creatively engaging with current political, social and cultural issues can have cathartic properties through the use of the senses: touch, sight and sound.

The artworks reproduced in this edition of *Law Text Culture* are not only intended as a comment on the political climate from a provincial pocket; they also aim to provide stimuli to negotiate current issues surrounding the notion of fear and terror from the alternative perspective of the creative arts. Photography becomes a means to query, dissect and interrogate dominant narratives of truth, thereby contrasting with the historical notion of photography as legal evidence, as Pryor and Blanchfield demonstrate.

The artworks represented here embody and articulate messages that are alternative representations to dominant narratives; here, the

artists offer views, attitudes and opinions to, as well as for, a public, by connecting creatively with issues that affect society.

As I have argued, the events of 11 September 2001 have induced fear, which in turn has led to the justification of administrative arbitrariness and the politicised abuse of the law. Creative intervention, such as the artworks reproduced here from the exhibition *Tactics Against Fear — Creativity as Catharsis*, can disrupt the popular narratives of the current climate of rhetoric of fear around the ‘war on terror’ by interrogating our new visual climate. The curatorial concept elicited how artists point out arbitrariness of new laws, and the danger of ‘tactics of fear’ to personal and social freedoms.

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