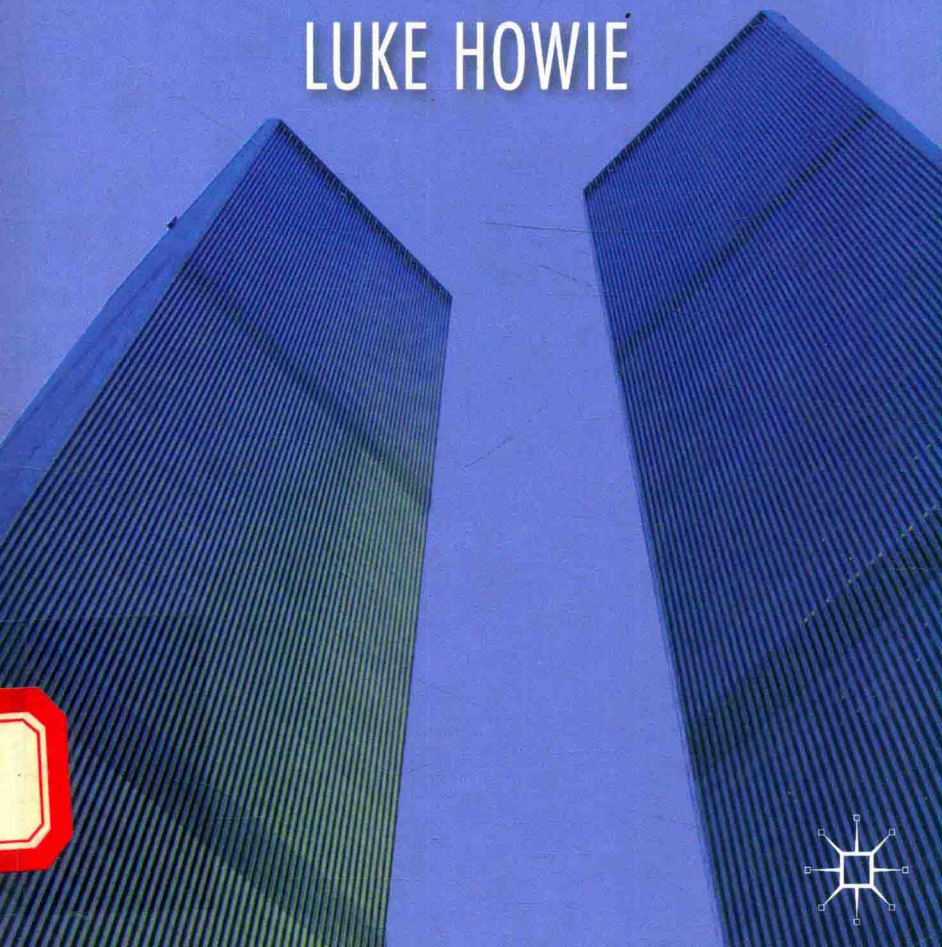


WITNESSES TO TERROR

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANINGS AND
CONSEQUENCES OF TERRORISM

LUKE HOWIE



Witnesses to Terror

Understanding the Meanings and Consequences of Terrorism

Luke Howie

Monash University, Australia

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Preface: A Note from a Post-9/11 World

I continue to be amazed by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and its many enduring consequences. 'Terrorism' was a concept only occasionally discussed outside of specialised academic, governmental, intelligence and policing circles before 9/11. *After 9/11* – after the attacks and after the terror, by which I mean *our* terror – 'terrorism' took its place amongst the everyday lives of witnesses throughout the world. The meanings and consequences of terrorism were everywhere. Suddenly terror could be found in the most mundane and banal situations – commuting to work, sitting in high-rise office buildings, flying in planes, attending major events, standing in crowds, watching the news on television or reading it in newspapers, logging on to the Net and in the faces of people we passed in the street (especially if they could be perceived to be Muslim or from the Middle East, the war on terror's *usual suspects*).

Perhaps the worst part about these scenarios is that this was the form that terrorism took for the lucky ones. The *lucky*, distant witnesses that did not directly experience the brutality of international terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century. If we call someone a *witness* to terror, we are often referring to someone that was not a *victim* of terrorism. Those who were killed, maimed or injured in an act of terrorism generally would not be described as witnesses in a time of terror. Whether they should be is probably a question for another day and another book. Holocaust Studies provides an interesting way of thinking about how witnesses should be located and named. For Weissman (2004: 5) those that were *there* are witnesses. Those that were *not there* but felt part of the impact and consequences, those that perhaps experienced terror in a vicarious way, are *nonwitnesses*. In this view, such people are a lower category of audience, lower in the survivors' hierarchy. In the context of the Holocaust, one can well understand this logic.

Why should terrorism be any different? I suggest it is different precisely because it is *terrorism* (that is 'terrorism' is the word we use to describe it). When we use the word 'terrorism' to describe an act of violence we are saying that it is violence designed to influence an

audience beyond the initial targets. We are saying that it is violence that is witnessed. Violence that does not cause fears, anxieties and terrors in some targeted population is not terrorism – it is called something else.

Terrorism is different because it can be witnessed by many millions of people throughout the world even as it is occurring. This is what happened on 9/11, and this is perhaps why these attacks have been a site for demarcation disputes in stories of legitimate terrorism witnessing. Two such disputes have particularly shaped my experiences of witnessing terrorism. In one I was confronted by a woman at a national sociology conference in Australia who declared she was a New Yorker. She told me very clearly that I had no right to speak about terrorism, and no right to be a witness to violence on my television screen. I should not be benefiting – that is, starting an academic career – on the backs of 3000 victims of terrorism (she did not mention the many thousands more who died in US-led, post-9/11 wars). The other is in the form of an opinion, restructured into poetic prose, of a young man who was a high-school student and New Yorker at the time of 9/11. His poem is about the gaping hole in the ground at Ground Zero and the people who came to see it:

There were people there *all the time*,
and they weren't even New Yorkers,
they weren't even people visiting some, you know,
taking a look at something that used to *be* there,
something that they used to know.
They were people from Kansas and Oklahoma,
and, you know,
Missouri, who had seen those places on postcards.
And they wanted to buy hats and pins,
and wanted to sing 'God Bless America' and
things like that.
Which made me sick.

(Smith in Thoms, 2002: xvii–xviii)

Responding to these moments poses many challenges and questions. How should I respond to a woman who speaks directly to me as a self-identified New Yorker whose lip is quivering with a combination of rage and anguish? Am I to believe that silence is how we might overcome terrorism? Perhaps a culture of silence has been part of the problem that allowed the violent desires of anti-American extremists to fester in a pre-9/11 world? Is 9/11 only for New Yorkers? If the tributes of

other Americans can make a New Yorker 'sick', then how must a witness in the distant oasis of Melbourne, Australia, make New Yorkers feel? Is my witnessing less legitimate? Am I not entitled to feel anxiety? I am an anxious person at the best of times, so should I be confronted or made to feel shame for having a story about witnessing terrorism to tell?

In the Bret Easton Ellis novel *The Rules of Attraction* (1987–1988), readers are told a traumatic tale of abuse, anxiety, suicide and violence. Importantly, this story is not told from just one viewpoint. Different characters provide their version of events as personal narratives. *The* story takes on sharp differences depending on who the storyteller is. So diverse are the different versions of the same events that the reader is left wondering which one is real, what really happened, what is exaggeration or fabrication and when something we might call *truth* or *reality* begins and subjectivity ends. Things that were life-changing events for one person were dull evenings for another. A torrid love affair for one character was not even worth mentioning for another. What *really* happened is not what matters.

When I was an undergraduate student I would sometimes attend performances by an acting troupe that referred to themselves as *Real Fiction*. Their performances were characterised by ambiguous beginnings and endings. Regularly the audiences would be found wondering when exactly the play they were watching had commenced and when it had ended. One play in particular, *Peg Sculpture*, was particularly unclear about starts and endings. At the beginning of this play a student actor would step on stage and announce that the play had been briefly delayed. He would apologise and then proceed to entertain the crowd with a fairy tale that his mother used to tell him when he was a child. He would turn to a woman in the audience and say, 'Do you remember, Mum?' The woman would nod vigorously and smile. The play, by this point, had begun and that woman was an actress that was built into the world in which the play was taking place.

This book is about how we perceive, understand, interpret and evaluate major global events. In particular, this book is about how the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, have reached witnesses of terrorism in multiple configurations of time and space. It is designed to demonstrate that witnessing is a problematic, even dangerous, occurrence that is always dependent on the 'never finished credibility' of those who do it – the witnesses (Haraway, 1997: 267). Witnesses have stories to share, whether those stories are real or fictional is not what is at stake. Witnessing is everyone's

right and responsibility, although it will sometimes cause offence and often spark debates about who gets to do it and whose witnessing matters most. Witnessing is highly subjective, yet millions of people can sometimes reach a widespread and broad agreement on what they have seen and what it means. Often that meaning changes with different viewpoints. The same person may give a different version of events at different times. Understanding which version to trust is a never-finished dilemma. In thinking about terrorism, this dilemma speaks to the heart of understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorist violence.

The question of which witnessing matters – and which *witnesses* matter most – becomes vitally important. But perhaps the best way to overcome the fraught consequences and anxieties of legitimate witnessing is to hear as many stories as possible and to always be aware that for many people their stories will never be told. I want to follow Katie King (2011) and always ask for, and be responsible to, the *stories* that need to be told.

Even as I write, stories of terrorism continue to shape everyday cultural and social relations. The London Olympics (2012) have sparked renewed anxieties amongst people in the United Kingdom as the counterterrorism arms of the UK government swung into full action in early 2012. What is the level of the terrorist threat to the Olympic Games? Officially, it is *severe*. Devi (2011) reminds us that the exhilaration of London winning the Olympics was overshadowed the next day by the 7/7 attacks. The foiling of another British terror plot in early 2011 and revelations that the suspects would plead guilty to the charges once again brought terror home to people living and working in London (O'Hare, 2011).

But how do we distinguish between real terror, fictional terror and perhaps terrorism that is *real fiction*? To answer this question we need to first understand that witnesses to terrorism that feel the emotion and psychological response that we describe as 'terror' – that indefinable fear of the void, that nothingness of uncertainty and ambivalence – do so by watching, by being part of an audience. Does this mean that witnesses are not victims of the violence? When is it legitimate to feel fear? How do we know when we are overreacting and letting our emotions run wild?

Whilst I feel confident in posing these difficult questions I cannot claim that my book will answer any of them well. I don't expect there to be much in the way of catharsis or even redemption. When I board a plane to the United States I would be lying if I said that I was not – in some small way, deep deep down – just a little concerned about

terrorism. As I have been told by a number of research respondents over the last seven years, it is not necessarily a conscious fear, but I know there is something there, something telling me that a threat exists and that I should be ready to respond or, perhaps, prepare for the worst.

But, as I have already said, I am an anxious person at the best of times ...

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1

Uncertainty in the Study of Terrorism

In 1927, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle changed what it means to do science and to think scientifically. He posited that certain relational concepts cannot be accurately and precisely measured at the same time (Heisenberg, 1927). One cannot, for example, accurately measure the velocity and precise location of a thing or an object simultaneously. Velocity assumes movement. Location assumes that things stay still long enough for them to be understood. We can easily re-appropriate this idea for the purposes of social scientific, political and cultural thought and ask ourselves as we think and do research: *is the thing that we are trying to understand remaining still long enough for it to be understood well or at all?*

Terrorism studies scholar Magnus Ranstorp believes that contemporary terrorism studies sits at a crossroads and may well be in crisis. A field that was once described as an 'invisible college' of academics and professionals spread across university departments, private research centres and government departments became suddenly mainstream in the aftermath of the most significant development in the field, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (known almost universally as '9/11') (Ranstorp, 2009: 14). This 'handful' of pre-9/11 terrorism scholars worked on interpreting 'immediate events', 'making sense of evolving trends' and 'predicting' what was coming (Ranstorp, 2009: 13). Its increasingly multi-disciplinary nature – a trend that is more apparent after 9/11, but was certainly true before 9/11 as well – was seen by many to be an advantage, but it also left the field open to charges of a lack of 'rigor ... theory, data and methods' (Stampnitzky in Ranstorp, 2009: 13).

Ranstorp (2009: 14) sympathises with Stampnitzky's stance and argues that terrorism studies lacks reflexivity and sophistication in theory

and method, and ‘suffers from a ‘relative absence of debate’ amongst entrenched terrorism studies academics.

Often disparate evidence is woven together selectively to suit the case without regard for specific contexts. Relying on each others’ work alongside government and media reports produced an ever-expanding intellectual quilt that had a tendency to grow in size, but less in layered intellectual depth. The same mantras or analogies... appeared across the terrorism studies literature without anyone ever critically questioning what it really meant and the social scientific basis or qualitative/quantitative method for getting to this conclusion.

(Ranstorp, 2009: 14)

Schmid and Jongman (1988: 177) had already identified similar problems when they argued that terrorism studies was often ‘impressionistic, superficial, and...pretentious’, and relied ‘on far-reaching generalizations’ of evidence and data that often informed only specific contexts whilst claiming to inform broad or generalisable conditions.

These might be charges levelled at any academic field but they seem particularly evident in terrorism studies. It has been a field colonised as much by terror academics as by journalists, quasi-experts and self-appointed specialists (see Howie, 2011: 72–75). Yet, whilst the contributions are diverse, debates within the field have been traditionally lacking.

A debate on methodologies in terrorism research recently broke out between two heavy hitters: Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman. Where some see division, Ranstorp (2009: 16–17) rightly sees progress. Debates and disagreements between academics are beneficial and positive because they create *uncertainty*. Uncertainty is the *life force* of scholarship and thought. Without uncertainty, scholarship is unnecessary or worse – a redundancy.

Uncertainty is foundational to thinking about terrorism and political violence, terrorists and their supporters and those that witness terrorist violence – the living audiences that are the terrorist’s primary target. Terrorism sparks uncertainty, ambivalence and odd debates about whether one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.

This uncertainty has stretched across multiple configurations of time and space. From the early days of contemporary terrorism scholarship in the 1970s through to the excesses of 9/11 and the post-9/11 world, and then to the multi-disciplinary accounts that have recently gathered

under the label of *critical studies on terrorism*, the word 'terrorism' has divided opinion, helped spectacularise media spaces and sparked furious and vitriolic debates. Through acts of violence carried out in the name of 'counterterrorism', it has also created generations of future terrorists ready to once again make witnesses of those who are watching their televisions or computer screens when terrorists strike. Few have been immune to the meanings and consequences of terrorism in the twenty-first century. Many millions witnessed 9/11 live and direct from New York City, Washington DC, and a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Many millions were also watching as the 'War on Terror' was launched with invasions of Afghanistan (where al Qaeda enjoyed a safe haven) and Iraq (the reasons for which remain only partially understood) (see Silberstein, 2002; Paust, 2003–2004; Klein, 2005; Faludi, 2008).

The consequences of terrorism extend far beyond this of course. The economy changed after 9/11, with some industry sectors more affected than others (although certain dire warnings such as 'people will never work in tall buildings again' have not eventuated; see Kunstler & Salingaros, 2001; Savitch, 2003). Tourism, the insurance industry and financial and economic markets were badly affected initially (Alexander & Alexander, 2002; Makinen, 2002; Alexander, 2004; Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008). The connections between the 9/11 attacks and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 are perhaps still open for discussion. There were simpler, more direct consequences. Racism and fear became an everyday feature of life for many Muslims and people who had the appearance of Muslims living in Western countries (Howie, 2009a; Aly & Green, 2010). Our popular culture changed too (Melnick, 2009; Howie, 2011). Our favourite television shows such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *The West Wing* and *Angel* were suddenly post-9/11 television. They changed, sometimes only subtly, as the world changed. Other television programmes emerged in direct response to 9/11. Programmes such as *24* and the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* were attempts to confront the post-9/11 world and engage with its consequences. Programmes such as *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother* and *True Blood* were less direct, but, nonetheless, forced a confrontation with continuing life in post-9/11 uncertainty, in a world that 'didn't blow up' (Bays in Callaghan, 2009).

But everything I have said so far only scratches the surface. I have not even mentioned further acts of terrorism that continued to occur across the world from Bali to London to Madrid to Mumbai to Oslo to Malaysia to Thailand to Pakistan and to a host of other places. But I intend on

doing a little more than scratch the surface in this book. And whilst I cannot guarantee too much certainty or promise to measure the velocity and location of terrorism simultaneously, I can offer a series of stories that illuminate what it means to live and work in a time of terror. I can demonstrate that terrorists want publicity and a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead. I can show you that understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism means understanding what it is to *witness* terrorist violence and counterterrorism reprisals. It is the story of what it means to be *witnesses to terror*.

What is critique? How to stand on the wrong building

'Critique', according to Butler (2002: 212), 'is always a critique of some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution'. It is a practice that loses its appeal the moment it becomes 'abstracted' – when it begins to 'stand alone' as a philosophy in its own right, when it is transformed into a *generalisation*. But this should not mean that critique cannot sometimes take the form of a generalisation or something situated and specific. What we should avoid, perhaps, in critiquing is mere 'fault finding' (Williams, 1976: 75–76). What we need, in Butler's (2002: 212) words, is a 'vocabulary' for doing critique as a way of establishing 'the kinds of responses we have' at our disposal that will not result in unsituated *judgement*. Judgement is not critique. Critique emerges when we suspend judgement and fight the seduction of standing in judgement. Critique is a 'practice of values' based on such a suspension. Judgement is about power. Critique is about revealing the 'constellations of power' that sustain judgements (Adorno, 1984: 30).

How then can we offer a critique without transforming it into judgement? We can do this by problematising, disrupting, offering some kind of unexpected, surprising, *untimely* account (Rabinow, 2009; Kelly, 2011). Critique is untimely when it disrupts established and often unquestioned versions of *truth* or *reality*. Untimely things might make us feel uncomfortable, uneasy, 'uncalm'. If undertaken effectively – without pretence or arrogance, and without judgement – untimeliness is necessary. It can illuminate that which had not seemed very important to us before and, in doing so, remind us of what we may be ignoring or forgetting.

I often describe the sort of work that I do in the interconnected fields of terrorism studies, the political sciences, sociology and cultural studies as *untimely*. As a way of describing the types of critique that I attempt, I sometimes deploy the metaphor of *standing on the wrong building*.

The origins of this metaphor can be found in a scenario involving a pre-9/11 terrorist threat and a popular television show about government conspiracies, alien invasions and sinister networks of fiends and allies known as *The X Files*. More precisely, I draw this metaphor from the first *X Files* movie (subtitled *Fight the Future*) (Howie, 2011: 3–4). In one of the film's opening scenes FBI agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder find themselves standing atop a tall, inner-city building in Dallas. They are looking for an explosive device after a bomb threat is 'called in' to the FBI. They look towards the top of another skyscraper across the street. It is a federal building swarming with agents with bomb-detection equipment, experts and specialists of all kinds who are searching for evidence of the explosive device that is supposed to be there. The building across the street from Mulder and Scully is the building against which the bomb threat has been made. Mulder and Scully choose to stand on the wrong building, a building across the street. They can still see the right building, but it is not the focus of their attention. They are following a 'hunch':

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.

(Carter & Spotnitz, 1998)

They are attempting to predict the unpredictable, anticipate something surprising. They feel free to do so because, as Mulder elegantly puts it, the other building does not need them. *Other people have that building covered.* I don't need to be working on some of the more popular or well-known fields in the study of terrorism such as radicalisation, the psychology of terrorists, the functionalities of terrorist organisations, the way terrorists use the Internet, the preparedness of the emergency

services, the effectiveness of military strategies for combating terrorism and a host of other possibilities. My colleagues – the many thousands of skilled and dedicated terrorism scholars from all over the world – appear to have that covered. I want to continue to use this metaphor that I first introduced in *Terror on the Screen* (2011) and expand it further. *Standing on the wrong building* is an important trope indicating parallax perceptions, alternative realities and a willingness to confront things that cannot be easily categorised, programmed, or referenced.

The research that was conducted for this book is of the kind identified by Ranstorp (2009: 32) as ‘public reactions to terrorism’. Most terrorism studies academics explore the roots of terrorism, terrorist organisations, law enforcement models, medical responses, biological warfare, strategic studies and a host of other fields. I study terrorism’s witnesses. It is a field I have been working in for some time as a post-9/11 terrorism scholar. Rarely is this ‘public reaction’ as important as it is in the world’s major cities. The contemporary city is a *theatre* for terrorism and is a place where distance is often of little comfort for those forced to witness global terrorist violence from post-9/11 locations. Social theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1995) has argued that the city is more than a place where people live, work and play. People and the cities they inhabit are intertwined and connected in powerful ways: ‘The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies’ (Grosz, 1995: 104).

I am reminded here of Hélène Cixous’ (1997: 307) haunting description of the city: ‘When we are alive we do not know we are ghosts. What are we in the promised cities? The contemporary dead of our descendants, the future returning ghosts.’ Cixous’ spectral monsters seem to be an apt metaphor for understanding post-9/11 terrorism. Cities are spaces where people flock to benefit from an expanded array of economic, social, cultural and interpersonal opportunities. It is the home of the affluent middle classes. It is also the home of the criminal and the terrorist (see Howie, 2009a). As Virilio (2002a: 82) controversially suggests, ‘The destruction wrought on the Pentagon was of little consequence; what exploded in people’s minds was the World Trade Center.’ The Towers were symbols of the hegemony of the city’s denizens’ lifestyle. When they fell to the streets of Lower Manhattan the fantasies of security that we all must hold in order to live our lives amongst other people were seriously damaged. Only time will tell if our efforts to imagine a more secure city will make us feel safer too.

Security, according to de Muynck (2004: 8), is deeply embedded in the Western psyche. ‘There can be no doubt’, de Muynck argues,