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At War with the Unknown: Hollywood, Homeland Security, and the Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism after 9/11

MICHAEL C. FRANK

ABSTRACT

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration established a security discourse based on the paradigm of “uncertain threats,” characterizing the “war on terror” as a war against the “unknown.” From the point of view of this new security discourse, counterterrorism should not confine itself to the accumulation of data concerning the goals, strategies, and means of terrorist networks. It also depends on ingenuity on the part of security analysts in the imagination of possible present and future events. Besides analyzing facts, counterterrorism has to work speculatively through possibilities, to think in the subjunctive. Consequently, members of the Hollywood entertainment industry were invited by the Pentagon in October 2001 “to brainstorm about possible terrorist targets and schemes in America and to offer solutions to those threats.” The present article argues that the consideration of fiction as potential fact is symptomatic of the discursive response to terror, which oscillates between the real (actual incidents of political violence) and the imaginary (anticipated further attacks), both drawing on and contributing to what I propose to conceptualize as the cultural imaginary of terrorism. Although this dynamic became particularly salient after 9/11, it has a much longer history, going back to the first emergence of sub-state violence against public targets at the close of the nineteenth century, when several literary writers devised spectacular scenarios of attacks from the air or with biological weapons. What distinguishes these late-Victorian fictions from post-9/11 counterterrorist discourse, however, is that the latter has made the imaginary an integral feature of homeland defense and thus a basis for political practice.

I. Introduction: At War with the Unknown

In a speech of January 31, 2002, Donald Rumsfeld stressed the need for transformation in the U.S. Military in the light of the current war against terrorism. According to the Secretary of State, the attacks of September 11, 2001, had single-handedly produced a paradigm shift in the field of homeland defense. He argued that Americans were now facing an entirely different threat to their security than in the previous century, one that was not “nearly as predictable”:

Who would have imagined only a few months ago that terrorists would take commercial airliners, turn them into missiles and use them to strike the Pentagon and the World Trade Towers, killing thousands? But it happened.

And let there be no doubt, in the years ahead, it is likely that we will be surprised again by new adversaries who may also strike in unexpected ways.

And as they gain access to weapons of increasing power—and let there be no doubt but that they are—these attacks will grow vastly more deadly than those we suffered several months ago.

Our challenge in this new century is a difficult one. It's really to prepare to defend our nation against the unknown, the uncertain and what we have to understand will be the unexpected. (U.S. Department of Defense)

What is immediately striking about this passage is that it characterizes America's "new adversaries" exclusively by way of negation, thus placing heavy emphasis on their difference from the more predictable enemies of old. Implied in the attributes "unknown," "uncertain," and "unexpected" is an almost nostalgic view of the world before 9/11, a world in which Americans had the certainty of dealing with a familiar foe whose actions could—at least potentially—be anticipated. This certainty was destroyed together with the World Trade Center, when Americans suffered an attack on their own territory by previously unknown perpetrators using unconventional means and weapons. Until the occurrence of that unprecedented and shattering event, no one "would have imagined" that anything of the sort was possible, let alone that it could happen on domestic soil.

Deploying the well-tried argument that extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures, Rumsfeld goes on to assert that the U.S. Armed Forces can no longer rely on methods developed in the context of earlier conflicts. The whole purpose of his speech is to justify the allegedly defensive strategy of preemptive attack, which would soon be put into practice against the regime of Saddam Hussein. Immediately following the cited passage, Rumsfeld cautions: "[W]e have to put aside the comfortable ways of thinking and planning, take risks and try new things so that we can prepare our forces to deter and defeat adversaries that have not yet emerged to challenges" (U.S. Department of Defense). This exhortation to "try new things" indicates that Rumsfeld was not passively registering, but actively advancing a paradigm shift. His talk was part of a broader effort to implement a novel security discourse premised on an understanding of homeland defense as the protection of U.S. citizens against indeterminate threats. Of particular importance in this context was the notion that the enemy was unknown and even unknowable, which considerably increased its perceived dangerousness. In Rumsfeld's words, there was no way of telling who ("new adversaries") would strike the U.S. when ("we will be surprised again") and how ("in unexpected ways"). The only thing that Americans could be sure of was that the enemy would strike again and that the next attack was bound to be much worse than even the worst terrorist incident in history. There could be "no doubt" about that, even if all the rest was uncertain—a claim that dramatically overstated the capabilities of terrorist groups.

In his meticulous analysis of speeches by U.S. officials from the day of the September 11 attacks to the first year of the Iraq War, political scientist Richard Jackson demonstrates how the Bush administration established "a kind of public narrative" with the aim of "normalising" the draconian measures it took in the name of countering terrorism (1). Because the government's policies demanded severe sacrifices from the public, both at home (the U.S.A. Patriot Act and its incursions into civil rights) and abroad (the various battlefields of the war against terrorism), they required a large degree of consensus or at least acquiescence. Accordingly, the Bush administration inflated the threat posed by terrorists by

deliberately disregarding the relative statistical insignificance of that threat. As Jackson emphasizes, “the risk of terrorist attack still ranked very low compared with other ‘normal’ risks,” which is why the rhetoric of imminent disaster was by no means “inevitable or simply a neutral or objective evaluation of the threat”:

There were and still are a great many alternatives to the language of threat and danger. [...] For example, the authorities could have tried to reassure the nation that the September 11, 2001 attacks were atypical events, both in terms of the ability of the terrorists to carry them out [...], and in terms of the extreme rarity of those kinds of attacks [...].

Instead, officials in the “war on terrorism” engaged in the deliberate construction of a world of unimaginable dangers and unspeakable threats. Within the suffocating confines of such an emergency, [...] it seems perfectly reasonable for the entire resources of the state to be mobilised in defence of the homeland and for pre-emptive war to be pursued. [...] Once it is accepted that terrorism is really this dangerous, a global “war against terrorism” on the scale and duration of the cold war appears perfectly reasonable. (120)

An especially glaring instance of this tendency to hyperbole is the postulation that “[t]errorists today can strike at any place, at any time, and with virtually any weapon” (Bush 8). Issued in June 2002 and signed by President George W. Bush, this ominous declaration appeared in the White House’s proposal for “a new government structure to protect against invisible enemies,” to be named the Department of Homeland Security (Bush 1). The DHS would become operational half a year later, in January 2003, the nation’s third-largest Cabinet department with more than 180,000 employees and a yearly budget of over 40 billion dollars (Daalgaard-Nielsen 39). The fact that no Department of Homeland Security had been deemed necessary during the Cold War suggests that small numbers of sub-state actors were considered a significantly greater menace to U.S. security than the whole former “East Bloc.” As the White House’s June 2002 statement shows, the argument that extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures can also be reversed: extraordinary measures (such as the establishment of a costly new government structure) call for extraordinary circumstances (which will incline the electorate to accept such an expenditure of tax money). For that reason, the White House’s outline of the DHS endowed terrorists with “fantastic divine powers,” as sociologist Frank Furedi observes, describing the enemy not only as invisible, but also as omnipotent—able to strike wherever, whenever, and with whatever weapon they choose (7).

The supposition that terrorists are able to attack “with virtually any weapon” is revealing here. Although the word “virtually” is used in the sense of “practically” or “almost,” it also hints at the peculiar nature of the threat, a threat that is virtual rather than concrete. Despite the lack of hard data corroborating such a scenario, the phrase “any weapon” insinuates that terrorists can gain (or already have gained) access to chemical, biological, or even nuclear arsenals and that they are both able and willing to deploy weapons of mass destruction against American targets. In the wake of 9/11, “the WMD threat did not have to be proven to actually exist in order to comprise a conceptual resource; the concept could be used to construct a hypothetical threat that policymakers could then draw upon in order to influence political discourse” (Bentley 106). Policymaking decisions were based upon, and legitimized by, purely hypothetical assumptions. Historian

of science Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi comments that in this way, the new security discourse “deflected the public’s attention away from a world with observable contours and toward a ghostly enemy that encompasses all possible threats, including those not yet imagined” (20).

Furedi has provided ample evidence of how, in the weeks and months following the 9/11 attacks, the acquisition of counterterrorism intelligence was repeatedly described “as a problem of imagination rather than of information” (xxiv). As he demonstrates, the creation of imaginative scenarios soon became an official means of complementing—and, if necessary, substituting for—observation and analysis, a trend in which Furedi recognizes “a tendency to overlook or minimize the role of research, reasoning and analytical thinking for making sense of this subject” (xxvii). From the point of view of the new security discourse, counterterrorism could not confine itself to the accumulation of data concerning the goals, strategies, and means of terrorist networks. It also depended on ingenuity in the imagination of possible present and future events. Besides analyzing facts, it had to work speculatively through possibilities, to think in the subjunctive. In this way, “[i]magining evil [was] presented as the medium through which understanding of the terrorist threat may be gained” (Furedi xxvi), which made the difference between actual and fictional threats increasingly difficult to discern.

One notable consequence of this prioritization of imagination over information was a curious revaluation of pre-9/11 films and novels, whose far-fetched portrayals of attacks on the U.S. homeland now appeared to be uncannily prophetic. Had these spectacular scenarios not foreseen key aspects of the September 11 attacks? In a March 2002 episode of the BBC foreign affairs television program *Panorama* carrying the title *A Warning from Hollywood*, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters declared that “Hollywood’s take on terrorism in the 90s [...] was absolutely more acute than virtually any intelligence report I read when I was in the Pentagon” (Bradshaw). Collapsing the distinction between the factual and the fictional as two separate modes of discourse, such commentaries went so far as to assert that popular literature and Hollywood cinema had provided better assessments of future threats than the whole security apparatus—as if that had been their express purpose and intention—and that, consequently, the intelligence community needed to learn to think like creative writers (to “routinize imagination,” as the *9/11 Commission Report* phrased it).

In what follows, I want to reconstruct this strange moment of epistemic confusion in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Using the example of late-Victorian Britain, I will argue that terrorist violence has always stimulated the collective imagination by virtue of its clandestine and serial nature: whenever spectacular, mass-mediated acts of international terrorism occur, they tend to trigger a proliferation of hypothetical scenarios speculating about possible future assaults. What distinguishes the post-9/11 situation from earlier manifestations of the cultural imaginary of terrorism, however, is the fact that in the context of the “war on terror,” the creation of what-if scenarios was not limited to the realm of literary and cinematic fiction. The cultural imaginary of terrorism was wholeheartedly embraced by politicians and security agencies, who made it an integral feature of the official approach to homeland defense.

II. Directors and Screenwriters as Security Experts

At the beginning of October 2001, when the fires at Ground Zero were still burning, news broke that “government intelligence specialists ha[d] been secretly soliciting terrorist scenarios from top Hollywood filmmakers and writers” (Brodesser). A three-day summit was held at the University of South California Institute for Creative Technology (ICT), an army-funded research institute established in 1999 to develop virtual environment training software for U.S. soldiers. Always well-informed about the goings-on in Hollywood, entertainment weekly *Variety* revealed that the aim of the meeting, which involved teleconferences with the Pentagon, was “to brainstorm about possible terrorist targets and schemes in America and to offer solutions to those threats” (Brodesser). All in all, thirty screenwriters, directors, and producers were present. According to Los Angeles-based journalist Peter Huck, the participants, who were not paid, agreed to remain anonymous and to keep silent about the content of their talks. Some names were leaked, nonetheless. *Variety* mentions the directors David Fincher, Spike Jonze, Randal Kleiser, Mary Lambert, and Joseph Zito, as well as the screenwriters Paul De Meo, Danny Bilson, Steven E. de Souza, and David Engelbach (Brodesser).

These names suggest that no specialized knowledge of either Middle Eastern history or the strategies of Islamic terrorism was expected from the participants, who seem to have been selected for a different kind of expertise. “[C]aught unawares,” Peter Huck believes, “Washington was desperate for fresh ideas.” He adds: “What intrigues Washington is Hollywood’s ability to think outside the box” (Huck). Steven E. de Souza recalls that at the beginning of the summit, Pentagon officials explained that “we’ve got all our people thinking in the channels that we’re trained to think in. We want some left field, off the wall, ideas. Say the craziest thing that comes into your mind” (Bradshaw). Some members of the work group had previously proven their ability to imagine attacks on American targets. Director David Fincher presumably owed his invitation to his then-recent adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club*. Fincher’s 1999 film closes with the synchronized bombing of seven credit-card company office buildings in an unidentified American city, carried out by domestic terrorist cell “Project Mayhem” as a symbolic blow against consumerism. In a scenario that now appears astonishingly similar to the television images of 9/11, the final sequence shows the protagonist and his girlfriend watching as one after another of the city’s skyscrapers collapses into itself. Other participants at the secret meeting had also been involved in terrorism-related projects. Steven E. de Souza, for instance, co-authored the classic action film *Die Hard* (1988) and its first sequel, *Die Hard 2: Die Harder* (1990). The latter film is set at Washington, D.C.’s Dulles Airport, where five of the 9/11 hijackers would board a plane destined to crash into the Pentagon. In the film, the terrorists—a group of renegade soldiers—come from within the United States. Under the command of a former colonel of the U.S. Army Special Forces, they take control of the airport’s communications and threaten to crash every inbound passenger plane unless a South American dictator and drug lord about to be transferred into U.S. custody is handed over to them. The better-known original, *Die Hard*, deals with the takeover of an office building in Los Angeles.

Led by Hans Gruber, a recently expelled member of the “Radical West-German Volksfrei [*sic*] Movement,” the armed men seize the tower during the Christmas celebration of the Japanese Nakatomi Corporation. What initially looks like a politically motivated act, complete with hostage taking, turns out to be an ordinary robbery: the group is after 640 million dollars worth of bearer bonds stored in the company’s security vault. In order to gain time and to distract the police and FBI from his true intentions, however, Gruber poses as a terrorist, randomly demanding the release of political prisoners around the world.

The filmic elements of airport, skyscraper, and arch-villains were apparently enough to qualify screenwriter De Souza as an expert in terrorist plots, whose imagination could be made profitable for homeland security. Other members of the group convened by the Pentagon appear to have been appointed for similar reasons. Director Joseph Zito’s credentials include such Cold War B-movies as the fiercely ideological Chuck Norris vehicle *Invasion U.S.A.* (1985). In this film, hundreds of mostly Latin American mercenaries, under the leadership of Soviet terrorist Rostov, land in Florida, seeking to unleash a reign of terror on American civilians. The guerrillas wreak havoc on suburban homes and a shopping center in Miami, until former CIA agent Matt Hunter (Chuck Norris)—forced from retirement in the Everglades—stops the invasion more or less single-handedly. *Invasion U.S.A.* was promoted with the tagline: “No one thought it could ever happen here... America wasn’t ready... But he was.”¹

“America wasn’t ready” is a key phrase here, since the collective shock of September 11, 2001 was attributed to precisely such a lack of preparedness. As the official *9/11 Commission Report* put it in 2004, the crashing of two hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the subsequent collapse of the Twin Towers confronted police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, and residents on the scene with “an unimaginable catastrophe [...] for which they were unprepared in terms of both training and mindset” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 315). In accordance with this diagnosis, the report greatly stresses the importance of anticipation: in order to brace itself for the threat of terrorism, America requires an effort of the imagination, so as to turn the “unimaginable” into an expectable scenario for which the country is both practically and psychologically prepared. Asking what lessons may be drawn from the disaster, the authors of the report come to the following conclusion: “We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 339). The necessity to improve the imagination not only comes first in the list, it is also treated at greater length than the other three points. The report argues that government and intelligence agencies both gravely underestimated the threat posed by al-Qaeda, and that they did not pay sufficient attention to the possibility of a terrorist act involving aircraft. In this context, the authors note that “[i]magination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies,” to which they add, “[i]t is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination” (National Commission on Terror-

¹ See the original movie poster for *Invasion U.S.A.* in the *International Movie Database*: <<http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2063186688/tt0089348>> (accessed July 22, 2015).

ist Attacks 344). The assumption that the power of the imagination is a crucial weapon in the fight against terrorism may help to explain why Washington sought the advice of Hollywood, whose screenwriters and directors had been tirelessly imagining attacks on domestic targets for several decades. Who would be better suited to teach “bureaucracies” the use of imagination?

At one level, the U.S. government’s recourse to the creative powers of the film entertainment industry constitutes a striking example of what cultural anthropologist Joseba Zulaika describes as the “crisis of knowledge” in counterterrorism (2). For Zulaika, this crisis stems from the self-referentiality of counterterrorist discourse, which is predicated on a “faulty epistemology—beginning with the placement of the entire phenomenon [of terrorism] in a context of taboo and the willful ignorance of the political subjectivities of the terrorists” (2). One would assume that the creation of “plausible” scenarios requires at least minimal familiarity with the actual perpetrators and the circumstances of their violence. From such a perspective, the decision to devise *imaginary* future attacks may be taken to indicate a reluctance on the part of counterterrorism officials to engage with *real* events (both past and present). As long as one is interested primarily in the possible outcome of terrorist ideologies, rather than their conditions of emergence, one may neglect the political and cultural factors that constitute the root of the problem—including America’s complex entanglements in the Middle East.

Read at another level, the idea of tapping into the creativity of screenwriters and directors seems like a logical consequence of the common perception that the attacks themselves appeared to have sprung from Hollywood films. Statements to the effect that the events in New York had seemed “like a movie” may be found in countless eyewitness accounts, and the cinematic analogy was immediately taken up by commentators all over the world (Frank, “Alien Terrorists” 153-54). “When we watched what was happening in America for the first time, we thought it might be another American movie,” runs one characteristic statement: “Later we found out that it was a real movie” (qtd. in “Saddam Mocks Hollywood”). The author of these words is none other than Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who made these utterances during a meeting with military industry technicians a little more than a week after the bombings. The Bush administration’s arch enemy had previously not been noted for proficiency in cultural and media criticism, and it is hardly surprising, therefore, that Hussein’s pronouncements contain a propagandist twist, implying a moral recrimination: “The Americans themselves have exported terrorism to the world through their films, where exaggeration and bullying are prevalent” (qtd. in “Saddam Mocks Hollywood”). Despite their highly specific political context, however, Hussein’s remarks have at least one thing in common with observations made by commentators in the West: the unquestioned assumption that the real happenings of 9/11 were so similar to fictional filmic images that this striking correspondence must be considered one of the essential characteristics of the event.

Even Hussein’s deliberately provocative assertion that on September 11, America became the victim of the violence that its own films had promoted throughout the world was no isolated opinion. Five weeks after the incident, veteran director Robert Altman used the attention prior to the release of his film

Gosford Park to urge his fellow directors to reconsider their routine indulgence in mass destruction. Altman did not, of course, accuse his colleagues of having somehow caused the attacks. But he unequivocally reminded Hollywood of its responsibilities by drawing a direct line from American blockbusters to the events of 9/11. The former, Altman asserted, had clearly served as a template for the latter: "Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie" (qtd. in "Hollywood 'Inspired US Attacks'"). If we follow this logic, then the directors and screenwriters summoned by the Pentagon in October 2001 had the task of fighting a danger which they themselves had helped create (if unwittingly); or, to put it differently, the Pentagon hoped to draw from the very source that had inspired the attackers. Richard Lindheim, executive director of the Institute for Creative Technology, where the meeting was held, reports that this was done in spite of the danger that the resulting scenarios might, again, fall into the wrong hands: "Our worst nightmare was that we would suggest scenarios to terrorists. [...] There's been too much history of people copycatting ideas from TV and movies" (qtd. in Huck).

But not all early commentaries on the analogies between Hollywood cinema and the attacks of September 11 subscribed to the copycatting thesis. Others were convinced that the attacks would have happened anyway—even without the help of cinematic templates, that is—and that screenwriters and directors had had an intuitive foreknowledge of this. This point is made by the aforementioned television documentary *A Warning from Hollywood*, which extends the argument to literary writings. The documentary cites the example of Tom Clancy's 1994 novel *Debt of Honor*, in which a severe conflict between the U.S.A. and Japan pushes a desperate Japan Air Lines pilot to crash his Boeing 747 full of fuel into Washington's Capitol building (possibly the fourth intended target of the 9/11 hijackers). BBC reporter Steve Bradshaw was not alone in considering this to have been "uncannily prophetic." The following is an excerpt from Bradshaw's interview with Tom Clancy:

TOM CLANCY: I didn't write *Debt of Honour* [sic] without first discussing it with an air force officer. And so I ran this idea past him and all of a sudden this guy's eyeballing me rather closely and I said come on general, I know you must have looked at this before, you've got to have a plan for it. And the guy goes "Mr Clancy, to the best of my knowledge, if we had a plan to deal with this, it would be secret, I wouldn't be able to talk to you about it, but to the best of my knowledge we've never looked at this possibility before."

BRADSHAW: How do you come up with this scenario, a plane flying into a government building full of fuel?

CLANCY: Well first you identify the point of vulnerability and then you try to see how you can address that particular problem. You know ... if the chain of command is all in one spot, that's where you want to put your weapon, and so then the next question is do we have a weapon to use.

BRADSHAW: And you came up with?

CLANCY: Well obviously, it's an aeroplane. I mean it's obvious. What else would it be? (Bradshaw)

As Bradshaw's documentary illustrates, there was a sense that whereas army and secret service officials had shown a considerable lack of imagination, novelists,

screenwriters, and directors had supplied strikingly visionary scenarios. Against this backdrop, the Pentagon appears to have assumed that “if Hollywood had seen the future coming once, maybe it could do so again” (Bradshaw).

The collaboration between Hollywood and the Pentagon shows that after the experience of 9/11 as a “real movie,” Washington was ready to shape real politics according to imaginary scenarios. Certainly, the meeting was just one of many measures taken by the U.S. government, and we should not, therefore, overstate its importance with regard to the Bush administration’s counterterrorist efforts. But even if it was politically inconsequential, the very idea of holding such a meeting is nonetheless significant. It indicates the extent to which terrorism, as an object of discourse, blurs the boundary between the factual and the non-factual.

III. The Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism

Although this little-investigated phenomenon became particularly apparent on and after September 11, 2001, it has a much longer history. Since its beginnings in the late-nineteenth century, sub-state terrorism has always been accompanied by myths and fictions about terrorist perpetrators, their motivations and goals, their methods and weapons, and, most important of all, their future plans. The reason for this lies in the strategic logic of terrorism. Actors engaging in terrorism devise and prepare their attacks clandestinely. In order to successfully execute their plots, they have to conceal their actions and intentions. Then, they unexpectedly come out of hiding to commit spectacular acts of violence in places of high visibility, eager to attract as much media attention as possible. Terrorism’s characteristic combination of dissimulation and spectacle requires imagination as well as organizational and tactical skills, a fact that applies not only to the perpetrators of political violence, but also to the officials and experts responsible for preventing it. Part of their job is to anticipate—on the basis of both facts and assumptions—who could strike when and where and how.

In their 2002 book *Minding the Machine: Preventing Technological Disasters*, William M. Evan and Mark Manion demonstrate such speculative forecasting. Addressing the ubiquitous post-9/11 scenario of terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction, they write:

For many years into the 21st century, terrorists will probably seek to convert technologies, whether high-tech or low-tech, into weapons of mass destruction. [...] In order to achieve a maximum of chaos, terrorists will probably target cultural symbols of Western Civilization in the United States and elsewhere. [...] To forestall and ward off their criminal designs we will have to surpass terrorists in ingenuity and creativity. (Evan and Manion 148)

Whereas the first two sentences describe probabilities (terrorists may, or may not, deploy WMD and they may, or may not, continue to target symbols of Western culture), the last sentence expresses a certainty: security officials *must* be more ingenious and creative than terrorists. This conclusion provides further evidence that after 9/11, the focus of counterterrorism immediately shifted to the future:

now that they had successfully attacked New York City and Washington, D.C., what would the terrorists do next? And how could they possibly surpass the mass murder of 9/11?

This orientation towards the future, which entails a shift to the imaginary, is symptomatic of the problem at hand (Frank, "Conjuring Up" 92-96). For what characterizes terrorism is less the single act of violence than it is the fact that this act is perceived to be the beginning, or part, of a potential series, and that further acts are expected to occur. To achieve its defining effect—collective fear of more violence to come—terrorism relies on the belief that the next attack is impending, and that it could happen anywhere, anytime. In this sense, the terror caused by terrorism is a halfway house between the real (actual attacks and their tangible aftermath) and the imaginary (possible future assaults). This gives terror a fantastical dimension, a fact reinforced by the perception of the perpetrators as being both invisible and in our very midst, omnipresent in public discourse but still elusive in person. The same holds true for the agents of counterterrorism. Because the threat of terrorism is often met with covert police and secret service operations, many counterterrorist activities are conducted clandestinely, in what Timothy Melley has felicitously termed the "covert sphere."² As a consequence, only spectacular occurrences, such as thwarted attacks, become visible to the general public; the rest remains in the dark, thereby offering a world of possibilities to the imagination.

The resulting oscillation between the real and the imaginary may be one of the reasons why writers of fiction were quick to respond when insurgent terrorism first emerged—in various guises—on the stage of history. From the last three decades of the nineteenth century, fiction dealing with terrorism has predominantly depicted imaginary attacks and perpetrators, answering real plots with invented ones. The "dynamite novels" of the late-Victorian period are a case in point.³ Instead of fictionalizing actual cases and circumstances of political violence, several turn-of-the-century writers imagined new perpetrators, weapons, and targets. Today, these texts seem no less prophetic than Clancy's 1994 pot-boiler *Debt of Honor*. Consider, for example, the below illustration from an 1893 novel by Edward Douglas Fawcett (1866-1960), a largely forgotten author of adventure stories and philosophical books (Figure 1). The corresponding passage in the novel reads like a scene from *Armageddon* or *Independence Day*, science fiction films of the late 1990s that relish in the destruction of huge landmark structures such as the Chrysler or Empire State Buildings and that have consequently been identified as possible templates for 9/11: "Horror of horrors, the great tower had fallen on the

² Melley defines the covert sphere as "a cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state" (5), adding that this sphere "is dominated by narrative fictions, such as novels, films, television series, and electronic games, for fiction is one of the few discourses in which the secret work of the state may be disclosed to citizens" (5-6). The cultural imaginary of the "covert sphere" intersects with that of terrorism in several ways; as I will argue, however, the cultural imaginary of terrorism transcends the realm of narrative fiction and also manifests itself in the official discourse.

³ On turn-of-the-century novels about dynamite terrorism, see Melchiori; Frank, "Plots"; Ó Donghaile.

crowd, bruising into jelly a legion of buried wretches, and beating into ruins the whole mass of buildings opposite” (Fawcett 144-47 [page 145 contains an illustration and page 146 is left blank]). The falling “tower” mentioned here is not located in New York, however, and it is not destroyed by aliens or meteorites. It is Big Ben, that most iconic of London landmarks, which is bombed from the air by a band of pan-European anarchists.

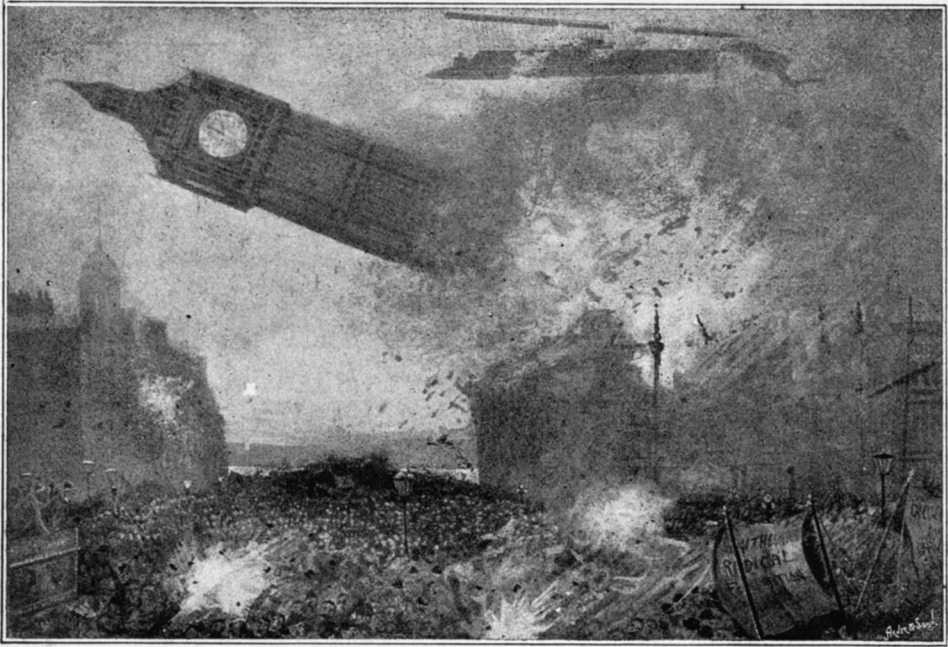


Figure 1: “Shelling the Houses of Parliament”; frontispiece by Fred T. Jane for E. Douglas Fawcett’s 1893 novel *Hartmann the Anarchist; or, The Doom of the Great City* (unnumbered illustration, opposite title page)

In describing an attack on the Palace of Westminster by politically motivated actors, Fawcett loosely drew on several past events. The idea of blowing up Parliament dates back as far as 1605, when Guy Fawkes and his Catholic co-conspirators hid thirty-six barrels of gunpowder under the House of Lords, which they planned to ignite during the speech of King James I, thus wiping out, in one blow, the country’s entire political elite (Kyle 42, 46-48). More recently, on January 24, 1885, Irish-American dynamiters had caused simultaneous explosions in the crypt of Westminster Hall and in the Chamber of the House of Commons, with a third synchronized explosion occurring in the Tower of London (Short 204-08). When Fawcett imagined a dynamite attack on London, he clearly had in mind the Fenian bombing campaign, of which the January 1885 events were the culmination. Yet he chose different perpetrators, presenting the dynamite attack on London as an extension of the current wave of anarchist terrorism in mainland Europe. His novel asks: what if anarchists decided to attack *us*? and: what if they used

advanced weaponry? Set a little less than thirty years in the future and following the example of Jules Verne's *Robur-le-Conquérant* (*Robur the Conqueror*, 1886), *Hartmann the Anarchist* revolves around a scientific and technological novum: a ship-like flying machine ("aéronef") that endows the story's villain—an anarchist leader Rudolf Hartmann—with almost superhuman powers.

If the British government of the time had convened a secret meeting with literary writers "to brainstorm about possible terrorist targets and schemes," Fawcett would probably have been among the invitees (Brodesser). And he would almost certainly have been joined by science fiction pioneer H. G. Wells. In 1894, Wells released "The Stolen Bacillus," a short story about an attempted biological attack on London.⁴ Its villain, a nameless anarchist of unknown origin, seeks to achieve notoriety by surpassing the recent terrorist exploits in France by Ravachol (alias François Claudius Koenigstein) and other notorious dynamite bombers. He gains access to a scientist's private laboratory and steals a test-tube of what he believes to be deadly cholera bacteria, intending to contaminate a drinking-water supply. During his escape in a cab, the glass tube breaks and spills its contents. Forced to change his plan, the anarchist decides to turn himself into a weapon of mass destruction. He drinks the remainder of the bacteria, tells his cabman to stop in Wellington Street, and walks off "towards Waterloo Bridge, carefully jostling his infected body against as many people as possible" (Wells 14-15). Although Wells's story closes on a note of comic relief,⁵ it is chilling in its depiction of the possible future course of terrorism. Two weeks after the September 11, 2001 attacks, *New York Times* correspondent Judith Miller—who had recently co-authored the best-selling *Germes: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War*—reported that she received countless calls from people asking how they could protect themselves against viral or bacteriological attacks. Miller explained that there were, indeed, many frightening scenarios that would "cause you trouble sleeping," one of which involved terrorists self-infected with smallpox or Marburg walking around malls to cause an epidemic (qtd. in Dowd). In his brilliant study *Anthrax*, historian Philip Sarasin has reconstructed the trajectory of the bio-terrorism phantasm from its genesis in the Clinton era to its boom during the run-up to the Iraq War (167-90). Wells's "The Stolen Bacillus" shows that the xenophobic fear of a "foreign body" acting as a "pathogenic agent" has an even longer history (Sarasin 169). More than one hundred years before the post-9/11 anthrax scare, Wells proved his visionary qualities by imagining bio-terrorism *avant la lettre*.

The anarchist of Wells's story embarks on a mission of indiscriminate violence, he accepts that he must die in the attack, and he thinks of himself as a "Martyr"—aspects that are more reminiscent of today's brand of terrorism than they are of late nineteenth-century forms of political violence (13). Like Fawcett's novel about the aerial bombing of London, "The Stolen Bacillus" shows that the relationship between historical manifestations of terrorism and literary or cinematic narratives

⁴ "The Stolen Bacillus" was first published in the *Pall Mall Budget* on June 21, 1894, and later collected in *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents* (1895).

⁵ In the end, it is revealed that the supposed cholera germs were really a "new species of Bacterium [...] that infest, and I think cause, the blue patches upon various monkeys" (Wells 16).

goes beyond a simple imitation of reality in fictional form. The moment sub-state actors started to launch dynamite attacks on cities, literary writers began to imagine what strategies and weapons these actors could use *next*. Basing their plots on historical models, they engaged in “what if?” thinking to create fictional stories. Superficially, there are some surprising similarities here between literature from around 1900 and post-9/11 scenarios about terrorism with weapons of mass destruction, even if the former made no claim to predicting the future—presenting mere “stories” rather than attempts at anticipating possible events.

On the basis of this observation, I would like to argue that both fictional narratives and the public discourse on terrorism draw on, and contribute to, what I propose to conceptualize as the “cultural imaginary of terrorism.” By this term, I mean the period-specific repertoire of conceptions and assumptions, images and stories pertaining to terrorism in both its actual and its potential forms. In each period, the available historical knowledge of *past* manifestations of political violence stands side by side with the respective period’s public discourse on *contemporary* forms of terrorism. The concept of the cultural imaginary of terrorism tries to account for the presence of a third element, namely non-factual (fictional or hypothetical) statements or texts, for example in the form of scenarios of *future* threats—ranging from the deliberately outrageous to the supposedly realistic. It is helpful, I think, to consider this imaginary as a separate entity, even if it is closely related to, and partially overlaps with, what cultural anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass term “terrorism discourse”: the prolific public discourse on terrorism, produced collaboratively by the media, academia, as well as by the principal protagonists themselves—the violent activists on the one hand, the attacked government on the other (3-30).

In their 1996 book *Terror and Taboo*, Zulaika and Douglass observe that “terrorism discourse is closely associated with fiction,” to which they add that this association works in both directions (9): fiction seeps into terrorist practices just as it is, in turn, informed by real-life models. Thus, Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator of the attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, was inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, whose fictional plot he partly re-enacted. Published in 1978 through the American neo-Nazi organization National Alliance, William Pierce’s novel describes the overthrow of the U.S. government by rural white supremacist extremists who bomb the FBI headquarters before instigating a race war against Jews and African Americans (Zulaika and Douglass 9-10). This case could be easily dismissed on the grounds that McVeigh was a lone perpetrator and lunatic. But there are also instances in which fictional scenarios impacted counterterrorist policies. Two years after the Oklahoma City bombing, then U.S. President Bill Clinton read Richard Preston’s thriller novel *The Cobra Event* (1997) and was apparently impressed with its premise. The idea of a genetically engineered super-virus threatening to annihilate the inhabitants of New York City and Washington, D. C., prompted Clinton to seek the advice of experts about the likelihood of such an event and to subsequently launch a bio-terrorism preparedness initiative (Sarasin 81-119). For Frank Furedi, Preston’s remarkable metamorphosis from a bestselling novelist to a self-proclaimed bio-weapons expert, who was invited to speak before a Senate Judiciary Subcommit-

tee, is symptomatic of how the prevalence of worst-case thinking in counterterrorism leads to an “erosion of the line between fact and fiction” (38).

Yet the association of terrorism discourse and fiction goes beyond such individual instances of mutual borrowing. Zulaika and Douglass make the more general argument that the whole public perception and discussion of terrorism relies heavily on myth, and that it therefore requires a specific method of critical analysis, which they term “a mythography of Terror” (x). By this they do not mean to reduce physical violence to mythical constructs and to thus deny terrorism’s extra-discursive dimension. On the contrary, their anthropological approach is interested precisely in the real actors, with one of the main targets of their critique being the pervasive taboo against interaction with terrorists. According to Zulaika and Douglass, terrorism discourse creates an atmosphere in which “the very attempt to ‘know’ how the terrorist thinks or lives can be deemed an abomination” (149). The discourse is thereby bereft of the corrective of empirical evidence; it gets caught in a self-referential loop resulting in “referential invalidity” and “rhetorical circularity” (Zulaika and Douglass ix).

In posing the rhetorical question as “to what extent *all* discourse on terrorism must conform to and borrow from some form of fictionalization,” Zulaika and Douglass seem to imply that “fictionalization” is a necessary, almost unavoidable component of the public discourse on terrorism (4; emphasis added). I agree that this public discourse is imbued with fiction (because the cultural imaginary is at work in it), but I would hesitate, nonetheless, to equate the concepts of “terrorism discourse” and the “cultural imaginary of terrorism.” Terrorism discourse cannot be reduced to its imaginative dimension, and it is important to maintain the distinction between the factual and the fictional as two separate modes of discourse—all the more because that distinction is so often undermined. In my conception, the cultural imaginary of terrorism emerges in the interplay between three factors: first, actual occurrences of terrorism and counterterrorism; second, their accompanying discourse; and, third, literary and cinematic fictions that are created in response to both the political-social reality and the current public debate (Figure 2).

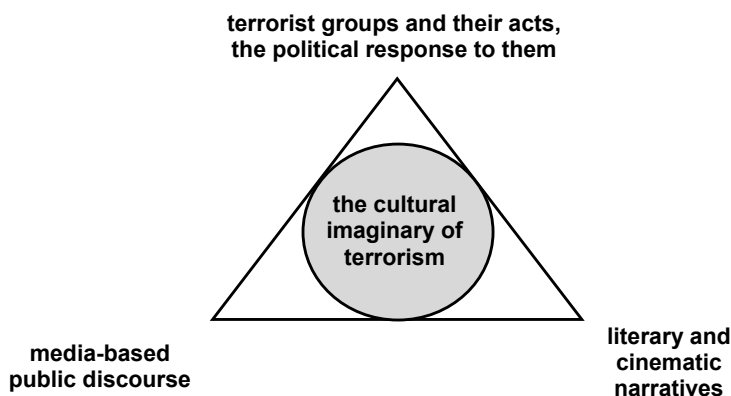


Figure 2: The cultural imaginary of terrorism: an attempt at visualization

In view of other uses of the term “imaginary,” this model of the cultural imaginary requires some theoretical specification.⁶ It should be mentioned, first of all, that it is distinct from models in the mould of Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis was the first theorist to argue that the creative imagination is a power shared by single human beings and social collectivities. He reserved the word “imaginary” for the latter. For Castoriadis, the imaginary is a “faculty of radical innovation” able to invent phenomena that have no precedent in the natural world: “Creation here means creation *ex nihilo*, bringing into being a form that was not there before” (“Imaginary and Imagination” 72, 73). According to this view, the imaginary produces not the “image of something” that precedes and determines it; rather, it is the other way around, the image created by the imaginary precedes the object that it represents: “[The imaginary] is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* [...] creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of ‘something’” (*Imaginary Institution*, 3). In this way, Castoriadis attempts to explain the capacity of societies to generate genuinely new and different meanings which become the basis for equally novel (or, as he has it, “other”) forms.⁷ As the original title of his seminal study *L’institution imaginaire de la société* indicates, Castoriadis maintains that the imaginary is at the origin of the social world that we inhabit. Societies are engaged in a process of continuing “self-creation” by means of, and through the medium of, the imaginary (Klooger 4-7, 37-63).

By contrast, my concept of the cultural imaginary of terrorism is concerned with how that imaginary *interacts* with events in the social world. My intention is not to explain the reality of terrorism as the product of the collective imagination, nor do I wish to suggest that the concept of the imaginary is able to cover all aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather, I consider the imaginary as just one—very important—dimension of the cultural response to terrorism. Among the available conceptualizations of the cultural imaginary, my model comes closest to that proposed by Graham Dawson. Employing the concept in the plural form, Dawson defines cultural imaginaries as “those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions” (48). Dawson goes on to explain that cultural imaginaries furnish “public forms which both organize knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the apparently ‘internal’ domain of psychic life” (48). Several important points should be highlighted here. To begin with, cultural imaginaries operate simultaneously on a social, discursive, and psychic level. Dawson’s attempt to link these three levels makes his model well-suited for an investigation of the nexus between political violence, the public discourse surrounding it, and the fearful “phantasies” that this discourse encourages—and that feed back into it (48). As Dawson’s short reference to “narrative forms” implies, moreover, the articulation of cultural imaginaries is shaped by literary tradition (48). Science

⁶ For an excellent survey of “Theoretical Perspectives on the Imaginary,” see Bieger, Saldívar, and Voelz xii-xviii.

⁷ On Castoriadis’s understanding of “creation *ex nihilo*” (which is tantamount with “creation of otherness”) see Mouzakitis.

fiction is just one particularly salient example of how narrative forms affect the resulting narratives.

IV. Conclusion

Although it has gained unprecedented prominence in the context of the “war on terror,” the cultural imaginary of terrorism is not, in itself, a new phenomenon. What *is* new is the way in which that imaginary has come to dominate the public discourse. As we saw, the security paradigm installed in the wake of 9/11 defined America’s challenge in the twenty-first century as uncertain threats. The fact that these threats were said to be posed by unknown adversaries greatly increased their perceived urgency. On February 11, 2003, FBI Director Robert Mueller informed the American public that “[t]he greatest threat is from al-Qaeda cells in the US that we have not yet identified.” This is a remarkable statement: even while Mueller concedes that the ontological status of the supposed danger is far from clear—the unidentified domestic terrorists may or may not exist—he insists that the unknown (and as yet hypothetical) sleeper cells are more dangerous than any known enemy. According to the logic of the new security discourse, the fact that federal agencies do not know whether potential bombers are present in the country does not diminish but increase the threat, because it makes it incalculable, regardless of statistical probability. At a meeting of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence two years later, Mueller underlined that “while we are proud of our accomplishments this year and the additional insight we have gained into al-Qaeda’s activity, I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing.” Mueller’s counterpart at the CIA, Director of Central Intelligence Porter J. Goss, was also present at the meeting. Not content with enumerating what his agency did not know or failed to see, he decided to list possible future scenarios: “It may be only a matter of time before al-Qaeda or another group attempts to use chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons (CBRN).” Goss employed the subjunctive mood to indicate that he lacked concrete evidence and that his statement was no more than a conjecture (“It may be...”), but he added: “We know from experience that al-Qaeda is a patient, persistent, imaginative, adaptive and dangerous opponent” (Goss).

When terrorists are “imaginative,” counterterrorism has to be even more imaginative. True to this principle, Robert Mueller gave a small insight into the FBI’s attempts at imagining possible terrorist schemes. In his February 2003 speech, Mueller stressed that it would be wrong to assume “that al-Qaeda will rely only on tried and true methods of attack”; rather, several other possibilities were plausible:

- Multiple small-scale attacks against soft targets—such as banks, shopping malls, supermarkets, apartment buildings, schools and universities, churches, and places of recreation and entertainment—would be easier to execute and would minimize the need to communicate with the central leadership, lowering the risks of detection.
- Poisoning food and water supplies also may be an attractive tactic in the future. Although technologically challenging, a successful attempt might cause thousands of casualties, sow fear among the US population, and undermine public confidence in the food and water supply.

- Cyberterrorism is also clearly an emerging threat. Terrorist groups are increasingly computer savvy, and some probably are acquiring the ability to use cyber attacks to inflict isolated and brief disruptions of US infrastructure. Due to the prevalence of publicly available hacker tools, many of these groups probably already have the capability to launch denial-of-service and other nuisance attacks against Internet-connected systems. (Mueller)

Some of these scenarios (such as the one involving the poisoning of water supplies, which calls to mind Wells's "The Stolen Bacillus") were familiar from literature and film. This time, however, they were not framed as fiction, but as hypothetical anticipations of future events. Mueller's unabashed use of the words "would be," "may be," and "probably" indicates that by early 2003, speculation was considered a legitimate, even indispensable tool in the war against terrorism—as if the maintenance of national security required Americans to be mentally prepared for *every conceivable attack*.

In order to enable such universal preparedness, the newly established Department of Homeland Security elaborated a document detailing no less than fifteen threat scenarios, a dozen of which feature attacks by unspecified terrorist groups—designated, without apparent irony, as "the Universal Adversary" (The Homeland Security Council). The *New York Times* was the first newspaper to report details from the document, which had been drafted over the course of 2004 and then been posted—inadvertently, according to the Department of Homeland Security—on a Hawaii state government website before being quickly withdrawn. *New York Times* correspondent Eric Lipton singled out the following "possible strikes": "blowing up a chlorine tank, killing 17,500 people and injuring more than 100,000; spreading pneumonic plague in the bathrooms of an airport, sports arena and train station, killing 2,500 and sickening 8,000 worldwide; and infecting cattle with foot-and-mouth disease at several sites, costing hundreds of millions of dollars in losses." The document (known simply as "National Planning Scenarios") testifies that three years after the events of 9/11, U.S. security agencies no longer needed the assistance of screenwriters and directors. They had learned to be creative themselves, and they celebrated this new-found ability by producing an abundance of threat scenarios. In a recent study, media scholar Richard Grusin has described this speculative turn as the "premediation of future events before they happen" (126). The way Grusin sees it, the post-9/11 preoccupation with impending disaster—the next attack to come—must be understood as a form of "medial pre-emption" (2). Grusin contends that by imagining all kinds of scenarios, premediation eliminates the category of the unimaginable, and that it thus "works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack" (2). It would be politically naive, however, to assume that the media act autonomously and altruistically to protect the public from trauma by providing a disinterested service of affective prophylaxis. As the examples above suggest, speculative threat scenarios serve to legitimize drastic political measures in the name of counterterrorism (such as pre-emptive war) and the very existence of counterterrorist institutions (such as the Department of Homeland Security). By constructing a world of uncertainty, the security system maintains itself.

At the same time, and equally problematically, it immunizes itself against the corrective of empirical evidence—to the point of divorcing itself from reality. According to political theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi, this is one of the consequences of the peculiar temporal logic of pre-emption, for which future threats never cease to be future threats, regardless of whether the expected attacks actually happen or not:

If the threat does not materialize, it still always would have if it could have. If the threat does materialize, then it just goes to show that the future potential for what happened had really been there in the past. In this case, the preemptive action is retroactively legitimated by future actual facts. (56)

Citing the concrete example of the Iraq War, Massumi comments:

The invasion was right because in the past there was a future threat. You cannot erase a “fact” like that. Just because the menace potential never became a clear and present danger doesn’t mean that it wasn’t there, all the more real for being nonexistent. [...] The threat *will have* been real for all eternity. (53)

In her incisive critique of the Bush administration’s security discourse, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi problematizes the ways in which “U.S. officials have been engrossed in the contemplation of nightmares rather than identifiable social [and] political [...] realities” (22). She goes on: “Advocates of the war on terror renounce the wisdom of engaging with the actual world [...] in favor of their own best guesses” (Ghamari-Tabrizi 22). To the extent that military and legal action was based on a rationale of preventing possible future events (rather than changing present realities), the cultural imaginary of terrorism became a significant shaping force in the realm of politics. In this way, a discourse based on the non-factual (hypothetical or outright fictional) brought about new facts: we live in a world that has been fundamentally transformed by the “war against the unknown.”

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