

Images of social control.

Fear and shock in the viewer of a world under threat

David Vázquez Couto
Universidad de Salamanca

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Abstract

Control systems and audiovisual technologies have a bilateral alliance that enables the structuring of a fear-based social discourse. If the terrible real event that unsettles the population has always been a key resource for commercial exploitation in the film industry, similarly, filmic strategies operate as an imaginary model for the recreation of the actual event. The social narrative is shaped under the constant threat of the other that induces a feeling of collective terror carefully managed by political power and mass media. Films have participated –and still do– in this process of staging of reality; however, it also warns of the danger inherent to its media status.

Keywords: Cinema, mass media, fear, dissuasion, shock.

I

In the seventies, the Watergate scandal unleashes in the United States, one of the first information quarrels that stirs the population's view of government agencies. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the N.S.A. (National Security Agency) exerted a year-long control over all telegraph messages to and from the country, thus violating the provisions of Section 605 of the Federal Code. At first, surveillance was focused on monitoring individuals or organizations that were potentially dangerous for the stability of the political system; however, the strategy was extended with the advancement of technological resources that enable an easy monitoring and control of the ideological merchandise that circulated electronically through the US territory (Gubern, 1977, p. 250-251). These spying tactics –that would delight enthusiasts of James Bond's adventures– are inevitably reminiscent of the totalitarian power structures advocated by Hobbes –which have endured virtually unchanged to the present. Thus, for example, and to corroborate this situation, the media organization WikiLeaks has been leaking classified documents of public interest since 2007. At this point it seems clear that political regimes take the liberty of certain information licences, ironically shielding themselves for the most part on the grounds of national security or the privacy protection of identity (corporate or individual). In this way, the monitoring system that obtains information withholding it from the public is reminiscent of the concept of the panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century for prison monitoring, and adapted by George Orwell to the structure of a totalitarian government, creator of the *Big Brother* society in

1984 (1949). Although the theoretical implications provided by these authors are enormous, they have a common thread: fear, which, according to Hobbes, implies “a certain foresight of future evil” (1966, p. 6).

Society’s latent fear of what lies ahead is evidenced by the abundant production of literary and film works after the Second World War, predicting dystopian societies. For example, Orwell’s abovementioned novel was brought to the screen by Michael Anderson in 1956 and by Michael Radford in 1984, and *Fahrenheit 451* (1954), by Ray Bradbury, had its namesake film version with François Truffaut in 1966. In 1971 Stanley Kubrick imagines an iniquitous future based on Anthony Burgess’s novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), a critique to the control systems used by the State to model behaviour patterns and suppress the drives that make the individual an undesirable being. Alex DeLarge becomes the empirical demonstration of the classical conditioning procedure or associative learning theory, using new imaging technologies as stimulating tools. Having undergone the Ludovico treatment, Alex, the sadistic sociopath who enjoyed violence and fantasised about the contemplative joy of Christ’s Passion, becomes a man whose free will is impaired due to his somatical reaction of nausea as an involuntary response to sexual and violent stimuli. In this process of re-education the stimuli are images of horror associated with the physical discomfort caused by a drug which, according to Dr. Brodsky, “will cause the subject to experience a deathlike paralysis together with deep feelings of terror and helplessness” (74’07”). The body learns, but it learns with images, with fragments that make up reality under the guidelines of power. While Alex watches torture and death, he thinks: “It’s funny how the colours of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on a screen” (72’48”). Although the method shown by Kubrick seems to have grown estranged from social reality over the years, we should not forget that it is considered for experimental use with specific individuals who have been excluded from the mass. It is a corrective tactic on a subject who is unable to adapt properly to an environment that hypocritically promotes pornography and ultra-violence. It is the synthesis that reveals a concern for the diligent ferocity of the mechanisms of power in their alliance with the new technologies. In fact, during those years, important changes occur in television programming due to the constant growth of audiovisual consumption. The same year *A Clockwork Orange* was shot, the concept of *Truth-TV* is born with the filming of the Loud family, a stereotype of the *American Way of Life* that ends up breaking down before the cameras. It is an event that reaches our day with by no means negligible ratings, proving Walter Benjamin’s statement that “mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself” (1968, p. 242). The Louds’ reality, like that of their television descendants, becomes television because their very life is the broadcast of life. In Professor O’Blivion’s words, one of the creators of *Videodrome*: “Television is reality, and reality is less than television” (35’50”).

In its reference to an abject and awful television program, *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983) speculates on the rise in violence and sex in the offer of the audiovisual entertainment industry, also questioning the dangers of mass culture, the ethical limits of its consumption and the new perception of reality through the image. Max Renn is the owner of a small clandestine

television station that offers viewers pornography and violence. Faced with the accusation that the broadcast content contributes to depravity, to dehumanization and desensitization due to a saturation of stimuli, he justifies himself claiming that his work is positive since it offers the public “a harmless outlet for their fantasies and their frustrations” (10’20”). Harmless because we all can be wild on the other side, in the world of representation that escapes moral restraint and becomes more authentic than its model. The deepest and most shameful desires, lurking in the unconscious, are unveiled in the experience of the contemplation of images such as the shown in Videodrome. Because “there is nothing real outside our perception of reality” (43’49”), recalls Professor O’Blivion, who concludes the broadcast claiming that “the television screen is the retina of the mind’s eye” (35’31”), which leads to an existence through the image on the screen, where reality becomes the public’s fantasy.

The violent event and its representation deliver a coordinated impact on society that enables fear to take root in the collective consciousness. Following the attacks in New York, London and Madrid, panic spread through Western society due to concerns about the possibility of further terrorist attacks. Under the pretext of taking preventive action against a possible enemy offensive, new laws were approved for control and surveillance in the infrastructures deemed as critical – stations, airports, nuclear and electrical power plants– that have called into question the perverse management of information in the media in the hands of state authority. A recent example is the proposal launched by the Ministry of Interior of the Spanish Government on March 9, 2005 (one year after the attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004): the Anti-Terrorism Alert Level (NAA), an estimate of the risk situation facing the threat of attacks made available to the citizen on the Ministry website. On June 26, 2015, the day after the jihadist attacks in Tunisia, France, Kuwait and Somalia, Spain set a level 4 (high) out of 5 (very high), thus increasing the previous category of social alarm. “We are speaking of a war of barbarism against civilization”, asserted the Minister of Internal Affairs, Jorge Fernández Díaz, in the Committee for Internal Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies which took place that day (Jiménez Gálvez, 2015). Thereby the State formalises a preventive activity which remains in force against external threat, legitimizing attitudes of control over the population based on a media management of insecurity, since this ideology seeks to generate a protective state agency that stimulates a feeling of anxiety before uncertainty. Sven Lütticken recalls that in these cases “the audience watches itself become a mass of potential victims, at the mercy of Homeland Security” and, in this sense, “terrorism becomes a foundation for politics: for the state needs its terrorists” (2006, p. 104-107). An unexpected benefit for the state is then produced in the terrorist event which, according to the German theoretician, is based on the idea of representing the contemporary spectacle under a *perpetual present* that “is ruled by media events, structured in turn by a dialectic of suspense and surprise” (2006, p. 95). This dialectic entails a temporary handling equivalent to that used by filmmakers to increase the tension of the story and provoke an outcome of greater effective intensity in the viewer, in such a way that the present is put on hold, pending resolution, dragging on under a suspicion of doom.

II

The use of new image technologies as instruments to manipulate historical events goes back to the factographic project developed in the Soviet Union after the Revolution of 1917. Factography involves

[T]he organization of a discourse from documentary materials [...]. The narration of the facts, however, refers to a kind of new literature that transcends the split universes of reality and fiction (Del Río, 2010, p. 35)

This comes from an awareness of the capacity of the image to make real what is represented, so under the cover of the recent evolution of film language, a new way to tell the story emerges in the Russian vanguards. In *The importance of film without actors*, an abridged shorthand of Dziga Vertov's intervention in a debate in the ARRK (Association of Workers in Revolutionary Cinematography) on September 26, 1923, a kind of cinema practiced by kinoks is promulgated which "has as its goal the organization of real life" (1984, p. 38). The technique of montage structures the shots that have been extracted from the world to give reality a new meaning. In this sense, according to Benjamin, cinema and photography would be new technologies that dissect and reconstruct the historic discourse with the vision provided by the camera: "multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law" (1968, p. 234). Thus, *Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, the audiovisual manifesto of *Kino Glaz* by Dziga Vertov made in 1929, reconstructs the world in the materiality of film, exploiting the conflict implicit in the documentary images that operate as reality chronicles of history. In the study that Víctor del Río dedicated to this topic, he proposes factography "as an experience that enables to reinterpret [...] the current conditions of the narrative construction of history in journalism and mass media" (2010, p. 32), making this practice a point of reference that still in force for political systems that seek to alter social conscience.

The immense power of suggestion of the media had already been demonstrated by Orson Welles's radio experiment broadcast by the CBS in New York in 1938. This event, based on the novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), by H. G. Wells, would be the starting point for the apocalyptic films grounded in the fear of otherness that overcrowd the American B series film industry in the fifties. Some classics such as *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) adequately represent a genre that could be expanded to embrace zombie films –popularized by George A. Romero in 1968 with *Night of the Living Dead*– and disaster films that re-emerge in the decade of the seventies; because from this moment representation techniques begin their evolution towards digital simulation to virtually fit with the real event. If the terrorist attack on the New York Twin Towers is often associated with images of the Statue of Liberty buried in the sand at the end of *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), the burning of the tallest skyscraper in the world in *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin and Irwin Allen, 1974) or the destruction of the White House in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), it is because both film and catastrophe are analogically structured to maintain a mutual representational relationship based on the association of symbolic images that represent the values of Western civilization. Sven Lütticken argues that if the filmmakers "took cues from

terrorism when perfecting their production of suspense and surprise”, current political and media organizations waging battle against barbarism happen to be “masters of the bad infinity of that present in which nothing ever happens” (2006: 95). When he illustrates his theory with the master of the art of temporary extension turned into suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, Lütticken realizes that the director had already made a circumstantial link between cinema and the spectacle of a terrorist attack in *Sabotage: The Woman Alone* (1936). In this free adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s novel, Mr. Verloc imagines the detonation of a bomb through the glass of an aquarium as if it were the movie screen of his own theatre. Hitchcock returns again to the subject in 1942 giving life to a second *Saboteur*. However, on this occasion the parallel with cinema is found near the end of the film, when Frank Fry begins a shooting during the screening of a gangster film. Baudrillard had suggested that a point has been reached “where it is the social itself which, in contemporary discourse, is organised according to a script for a disaster film” (1983, p. 23). In fact, from from the seventies, the expansion of the new digital media and the mass consumption of television favour in the coming years the tracking of live news, so that the dialectic of suspense and surprise “seeps into the whole of postmodern time, squashing and stretching it” (Lütticken, 2006, p. 103). The gates are therefore open to allow the reconstruction of history in real time, because what yesteryear was restricted to the duration of movie, is now beginning to coexist with its consumer within an unfinished timeframe.

The current trend to recycle in the audiovisual entertainment industry involves going back to the themes and myths of yesteryear by developing remakes that operate as nostalgic reproductions of the past. New versions of *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich in 1998 and Gareth Edwards in 2014), *Planet of the Apes* (Tim Burton, 2001), *The War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, 2008) evidence a paradoxical fact: the evasion from the present grievance while a past conflict is updated. The conservative fantasy of the public seems heir to a culture that insists on remembering the threat, since we still find ourselves in the same present of the past that fears “the real return of the other by means of the media simulation in images” (Duque, 2008: 85). Be they Indians, aliens, mutants, zombies or communists, otherness is presented in these cases as a threat to the security of a fissured capitalist system. The mass media are responsible for inducing fear in society at the possibility of an attack by an unknown being, the Other. But the Other does not exist as such, it is an imaginary product, a culturally stereotyped recreation, projected onto a different individual or social group. Cinema conveniently makes another reality, its double, where there is room for the figure of the Other as a representation of what we are not, of what we should not be, setting a safety distance that allows a hierarchical control over the different. For example, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), we see this informative process criticized when we hear defamatory messages on the radio against Klaatu, the extraterrestrial visitor (with a fully human appearance) who comes to save humanity. However, salvation comes by means of dissuasion. Klaatu warns humans that further progress in nuclear weapons research will force him to destroy the Earth with a superior technology. The choice is simple: submissive peace or annihilation. This strategy of the plot enables the film to become part of the dissuasive system from the very falsity of its denial. It is a warning to the world that everyone who dare go against the power will receive the greatest of punishments, as happens in *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying*

and *Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). The sharp satire about the ideology that supports the development of weapons during the Cold War reaches the limits of the absurd with the ‘Doomsday Machine’; a device developed by the Soviets which can extinguish life on the planet, plunging it into the dreaded nuclear holocaust. Dr. Strangelove, a former Nazi scientist who works as a director of arms research and development of the American government, asserts that the secret to control the masses is dissuasion: “the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack” (52’23”). Considering that fictions are true if they are functional, as Hans Vaihinger had already presumed in his work *The Philosophy of ‘As if’* (1911), the dissuasive effect renders disaster unnecessary because dissuasion becomes real through recreation, thus neutralizing the other competing systems on the pretext of an imminent danger. It is about “saving the reality principle” in which there is “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 3). In this way dominant ideology introduces horror in its discourse as a dissuasive element of control to maintain the social order. It is the instigation of fear of the other, the bastard son of culture, the stigmatized ones who embody evil and the threat of destruction, since *fear (Furcht)*, according to Heidegger, always refers to something, to someone, to something identifiable that is susceptible to cause damage (1953/1991). Fear awakens man from his peaceful daydream and presents before him a hostile world in continuous suspense because it turns living into survival.

III

“Why are our lives dominated by discontent, anguish, the fear of war, and war?” So begins *La rabbia* (1963), a documentary essay that provides two views on this question with a blend of archival footage and texts by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Giovannino Guareschi. The second part, by this latter, reads: “Soon the Chinese will be one billion. One billion hungry people. When this bomb explodes the world will tremble. [...] We are walking an unknown path. This uncertainty about tomorrow is our anguish” (91’). That same year, Ingmar Bergman tells of a nuclear terror that resounded in the media, distressing viewers as Jonas Persson in *Nattvardsgästerna*. Jonas is a fisherman in a small Swedish village who, after reading in the papers the news of China’s nuclear threat, submerges himself in a voluntary social marginality. He does not speak, he does not want to see anyone, he can only think of the horrible destruction that lies ahead, of the cries that will be heard under the rubble. Karin, his wife, convinces him to talk to the church pastor in an attempt to return him to normality. To intercede for him, she explains how the press claimed that “the Chinese are educated to hate, and it is only a matter of time before they have the atomic bomb. ‘They have nothing to lose’, so they said” (17’36”). Fear is the reflection of memory that returns to warn of a possible event that will admit no amendments. These are images of the past that come rushing on a conscience full of guilt and fear before a return to a *bellum omnium contra omnes* –as Hobbes would say– since the memory still lingers of the bombs detonated on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of those who saw the blackened and steaming skins coming out of hell. It is the case of witnesses to the catastrophe like Nakajima Kijiji, an old survivor of the disaster in *Ikimono no Kiroku* (Akira Kurosawa, 1955). Nakajima suffers the consequences of the most overwhelming reality that others do not want to (re)cognise. As if remembering Aristotle’s

words that warn that “danger is the proximity of the frightening” (1991, p. 153), he tries to escape with his family as far as possible, but finally, unable to live in society, he ends up confined in a psychiatric facility, believing that he has finally escaped barbarism. In the last conversation he has with Dr. Harada, Nakajima tells him: “You are safe here. Don’t worry. By the way, what happened to the Earth? [...] Are there many people there still? [...] Better hurry up and come to this planet!” Suddenly the blinding sunlight shines through the window. Nakajima gets up from his bed to watch from afar, from the distance that separates him from the world, the huge fireball suspended in the sky: “Is it on fire? The Earth is burning! [...] Finally the Earth has gone up in flames!” (98’20”).

The terrible future comes as a replica of the event already known, but finally resolving the contained tension –at least for old Nakajima– that achieves his redemption with the certainty of the accomplishment of what had been waiting impatiently. The images serve as a technical device that creates a state of alarm and warning –what is shown is what can happen– playing, at the same time, the trigger role of a cumulative discomfort in society. *Nicht lösches Feuer* (1969), one of the first documentaries by Harun Farocki, describes the production process of the napalm used in the Vietnam War. The director, sitting in front of the camera, draws the spectators’ attention warning that “if we show images of napalm burns, you will close your eyes. First you will close your eyes to the pictures. Then you will close your eyes to the memory. Then you will close your eyes to the facts. Then you will close your eyes to the whole context” (01’22”). So, how to explain the effects of this jellied gasoline on the body? Farocki responds with the shock of the image by turning off on the skin of his arm a cigarette that burns at a temperature of 400 °C. This subversive and direct image, which impact reaches to shock the viewer’s anesthetized consciousness, shows a small part of the pain caused by the burns of napalm at 3,000 °C, like those Elisabeth Vogler witnessed. Smothered in an environment dominated by the inexplicable cruelty of *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966), faces the horror on television broadcast: the bonzo suicide of a buddhist monk in the streets of Saigon in protest against the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm. With the intent of going beyond the reference, Bergman decontextualizes the event breaking the link it maintains with the social and cultural ideology to show a symbolic image of suffering. According to Roland Barthes, in the image “the trauma is a suspension of a language, a blocking of meaning”, so “the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is connotation” (1977: 30-31). The traumatic image comes near to pure denotation –the signs that form it lose their meaning due to receptive impact that limits the application of a code– in a state of painful disconnection that “allows to recognize to the Other and Otherness in an insurmountable distance” (Duque, 2008, p. 26). Elisabeth senses the violent misfortune of society, awaiting the destruction of all protective artifice articulated by man. It is the experience that leaves the viewer frightened at the threat of an identifiable figure, a wrong man exposed in the commotion that briefly interrupts uncertainty to reaffirm the suspicion of a near end.

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