

The oxygen of terrorists

Metta Spencer

There is a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the mass media: Stories about terror sell to avid audiences, while they also generate the publicity craved by terrorists. The ethical aspect of this unintended complicity is rarely addressed publicly, for there is no obvious way of avoiding such a convergence of interests. Any plausible solutions seem only to mitigate the problem a bit. This article will reflect on the complicity issue as an ethical challenge.

The definition of terrorism is much contested. Here I shall assume the one proposed by a United Nations panel in 2005. Terrorism they defined as an act 'intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstaining from doing any act.'¹

The many disputes about the definition involve two main issues: first, whether the term should include 'state terrorism' and second, whether groups defending their territory from invaders can properly be called terrorists. I will not go into those issues here, beyond acknowledging that (a) states sometimes do things that are as bad as terrorism, and (b) to define an act as terrorism is not the same thing as condemning it morally, though that is usually implicit. Debate inevitably continues about each case.

I'll assume here, in accordance with ordinary usage, that most terrorist acts are politically motivated and perpetrated by non-state actors. There are infinite varieties of such actors, ranging from the Jacobin Club, which invented terror during the French Revolution, to al-Qaeda of our own day.

The ethical challenge to storytellers

The ethical dilemma for media producers and consumers arises from the fact that the publicity given to an act of terror may (a) prompt additional instances of it and/or (b) satisfy the perpetrators by drawing attention to their cause, possibly thereby empowering them. As Martha Crenshaw has shown, there is a contagion effect that resembles the well-established 'copycat effect' resulting from witnessing violence in the media, especially on the news.² Groups sometimes adopt terrorist methods because they have observed the similar actions of others, sometimes in distant countries.

Terrorist groups are gratified by publicity. In fact, the quest for public attention is probably their main motivation. As Margaret Thatcher once declared, 'publicity is the oxygen of terrorism.' Indeed, she sought to suffocate the Irish Republican Army's terrorism by legislating a reduction in the coverage given to it by the media. Such restrictions have since been eliminated, since everyone recognizes them to be antithetical to other values: freedom of the press and of speech. An informed citizenry needs to know about current dangers by following the reportage and analysis of news, even if it inflates the importance of terrorists.

Nevertheless, conscientious journalists do worry about the social impact of their reportage and about their symbiotic relationship with terrorism.

Fortunately, it may be somewhat easier to reduce that moral dilemma with respect to the production of *entertainment* about terrorism rather than news coverage. The audiences for TV and film dramas are huge and the impact on public opinion can be enormous. Therefore I shall limit the subject of analysis in this article to *storytelling about terrorism*, asking how screenwriters can develop gripping plots without unintentionally providing oxygen for terrorism or, on the other hand, justifying human rights violations by counter-terrorists. (Admittedly, certain writers may fully *intend* to promote a terrorist cause, but I'll leave them aside here, addressing instead the ethical dilemma.)

Sometimes a writer may intend for her story to argue forcefully against a violent group, whereas in reality viewers come away with a totally different impression. Indeed, in cases when terrorist groups are gratified by the publicity, the explanation is likely to be that the writing is too ambiguous. All stories send messages, whether intended or not, but not all audiences receive the intended message. Especially when the story involves a grave political or moral conflict, the message requires clarity, above all. This suggests two considerations.

Two principles of clarity

First, to put a message across, *some overt verbal statement of it is ordinarily necessary*. Unfortunately, this advice can violate the artistic ideal of subtlety. Screenwriting instructors typically admonish their students to 'show, don't tell.' In other words, let the characters' actions, not their words, reveal their intentions and beliefs. Nevertheless, to create a reliable impact, a writer usually needs to show *and also* tell, though not in a heavy-handed way.³

Second, stories about violent conflicts are usually cautionary tales. Unfortunately, *these rarely, by themselves, influence audiences for the better*. There have been thousands of movies, for example, that drive home this lesson: 'War is hell.' But unless an alternative answer is given for the problems that wars address, no moviegoer comes away any wiser about what can be done

instead. Every negative example needs to be *explicitly contrasted with an alternative, constructive solution*. Few writers of cautionary tales ever offer such comparisons.

A scrupulous adherence to these two principles can reduce a writer's legitimate concern that by portraying terrorism she is engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the perpetrators by publicizing their cause or with illegitimate counter-terrorists by promoting their violent methods.

An instance of this latter form of irresponsibility can be seen in the television serial, *24*, where, in frequent 'ticking time bomb' plots, the counter-terrorism specialist, Jack Bauer, tortures his antagonist to extract vital intelligence and prevent a catastrophe. Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, an instructor at West Point who teaches courses on the laws of war, met the show's producers and protested against such plots. He told them that *24* was exceedingly popular among young troops and was having a harmful influence on them. According to the *New Yorker* magazine, Finnegan commented, 'I'd like them to stop. They should do a show where torture backfires. The kids see it and say, "If torture is wrong, what about *24*?" The disturbing thing is that although torture may cause Jack Bauer some angst, it is always the patriotic thing to do.'⁴

A different, but equally repugnant, message is also possible: that terrorism is unavoidable and even acceptable. Many realistic dramas, often re-enactments of historical events, convey this idea. I'll illustrate this ethical failing with two examples of acclaimed films about terrorism: Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, and Steven Spielberg's *Munich*. Both films were realistic simulations of documentaries. Both of them pointed out tragic moral dilemmas that confront terrorists and counter-terrorist authorities alike. Both films were 'cautionary tales', rather than cheerleaders for violence as a valid approach to political issues. Yet neither film suggested nonviolent solutions, and both even implied that terrorism is inevitable, given the absence of alternative solutions to the terrorists' grievances.

The Battle of Algiers portrays the urban phase of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) struggle in the war for Algerian Independence (1954-62). The film has been studied by counter-terrorism military strategists and by subsequent generations of terrorists, each drawing lessons from their counterparts in the film. Pontecorvo depicted accurately the escalating series of violent events in Algiers between terrorists and the French army. Whenever the army exploded a bomb in the Casbah, say, the anti-colonialists would retaliate by bombing cafés and other public spots. The series of tit-for-tat responses ended only when the army bombed the Casbah hiding place of the movement's leaders.

The terrorists sought to conceal the identity of their members with a classical organizational model: Each cell included only three persons, so that no ordinary participant was able to reveal more than two other names, even under torture. Indeed, the French army tortured on a massive scale, eventually with success — though ultimately that triumph was overturned. As the extent of the torture became known, a moral revulsion arose in public opinion. Therefore, within months after the independence movement had presumably been crushed, the Algerian populace took to

the streets in such numbers that victory became theirs.

What was the message of *The Battle of Algiers*? The film was not markedly slanted in either direction and both terrorists and counter-terrorists learned tactical lessons from it. Predictably, the army deems torture a necessary method of extracting vital information that can be gained in no other way. The structure of terrorist organizations is explored, yet finally exposed as an inadequate way to hide the composition of the whole organization. Eventually, the public's moral revulsion against torture is shown to cancel out all the advantages that it had lent to counter-terrorist militias.

One may read the message this way: *'If your methods are too oppressive, eventually you will lose by turning the populace against you.'* But other viewers might not see this as the intended message. They might read the message this way: *'Torture works. It may or may not succeed in the long term. In Algeria it finally did not, but elsewhere it probably does.'* The conclusion would have been stronger had it been less ambiguous.

In any case, the film is at best a cautionary tale. It shows that terror is a dreadful way of winning political independence. The director, Gillo Pontecorvo, did not, however, doubt that independence from colonial rule was a valid objective. We must ask, then, whether he taught the lessons that nationalists need to learn. Nothing in his film questions the terrorists' goals or methods. No reviewers apparently expected the film to offer alternative solutions, though that is exactly what would have made it socially valuable. Given the hideous violence on both sides of the Algerian revolution, what alternatives could have been explored instead?

Pontecorvo might have contrasted the Algerian anti-colonial revolution to the Indian one. Estimates vary widely, but one intermediate-level guess put the number of fatalities in the entire Algerian revolution at a staggering 650,000. In India, however, the fatalities during Gandhi's prolonged Quit India movement were only a few thousand. (However, a decision by Britain to partition the country at independence led to a bloodbath that was even worse than the Algerian terror.)

What might the message be for a film contrasting the cautionary Algerian tale with the nonviolent example of India? Perhaps this: *'Nonviolent protest is the optimum way to win an anti-colonial struggle. However, it is unwise to partition the newly independent state, lest all the benefits of nonviolence be lost in a spasm of recrimination.'* Whatever is the intended message, a character should at least express it in an overt comment, for viewers may not otherwise reach any inference whatever about the meaning of the film.

We turn now to the Spielberg film, *Munich*, another cautionary tale about terrorism and counter-

terrorism. In 1972 the Palestinian terrorist organization Black September raided the Olympic grounds in Munich, Germany, killing two Israeli athletes and taking another eleven as hostages. In a shoot-out with German police, nine more Israeli athletes, five of the eight gunmen, and a German policeman were killed. The remaining three kidnappers were captured but later released after a plane was hijacked from Beirut.

In the aftermath of this event, the Israeli political leadership organized a team whose mission was to find and kill the responsible Black September terrorists, anywhere in the world. The film follows these Israeli assassins throughout their mission, which can be called only a qualified success. Though they do manage to kill their targets, they experience growing guilt and anxiety. They accidentally kill or injure innocent bystanders. As soon as they kill one Black September member, he is immediately replaced. The mutual retaliation expands, so that they in turn are now being assassinated and must fear for the lives of their families. These tit-for-tat retaliations can go on forever. Yet what alternative solution could there be?

George Jonas, the author of the book *Vengeance* on which the film is based, discusses this dilemma, observing that mutual retaliation never solves the problem.⁵ Indeed, he suggests that there can be no solution, but even so, that political leaders must go ahead and mount such missions. They would appear ineffectual if they just let the terrorists get away with their attack! They must proceed on a course that they themselves recognize as benefiting no one and never ending.

What a conclusion! But in fact, there *are* alternative, nonviolent solutions — including one that Jonas or Spielberg could easily have written into the script. It actually took place.⁶

The Munich attack on the athletes gave Black September immense publicity and made the world (including the United Nations) take the Palestine Liberation Organization and al-Fatah seriously. Then Black September had served its purpose; any further terrorist activities would potentially wreck its own achievements. Yasser Arafat therefore ordered for it to be ‘turned off’. But how?

Hundreds of attractive young Palestinian women were contacted and told: ‘Your fatherland needs you. Will you accept a critical mission of utmost importance to the Palestinian people?’ The hundred women who accepted were invited to Beirut for a party, where they were introduced to about one hundred Black Septemberists, who were told that if they married, they would be paid \$3,000, given an apartment in Beirut with a gas stove, a refrigerator, and a TV set, and a nonviolent job with the PLO. Any of these couples who had a baby within a year would be given \$5,000 more.

Almost all of these terrorists did marry and settle down into family life. They were occasionally

'tested' by being asked to travel to the PLO offices abroad, but none of them was willing to do so. They did not want to risk being arrested and deprived of their wives and children.

Spielberg could have told this story, but he did not. It offers an alternative to the miserable message of *Munich*. Indeed, there have been other cases where terrorists have been induced to settle down. In Northern Ireland, for example, IRA and Loyalist terrorists were given furloughs from prison so that they could re-establish ties with kin. Upon their return to prison, they were offered expedited releases on condition that they abandon their violent ways. In a carefully graduated series of moves, they were induced to reject terrorism in favor of stable family life. Had a movie about this been made, its message would differ markedly from that of *Munich*.

Address root causes above all

I do not argue that terrorists or screenwriters can easily find alternative solutions to all conflicts. Nor do I want to oversimplify the degrees and varieties of injustice that may animate terrorists. Not all terrorist groups' grievances are as delusory as, say, those of the Aum Shinrikyo cult, who released sarin in the Tokyo subway. Far from it. The resolution of violent disputes should ordinarily proceed by addressing their root causes — which notably include disputes over territory, governance, and social exclusion, as well as culture, language, and religion.

Today many or most terrorists come from populations that are under foreign occupation — a political problem that has to be addressed head-on. Only a small part of today's world-wide upsurge of terrorism can be attributed to the contagion effect or the 'oxygen of publicity'. On the other hand, we should not discount those effects altogether, for they are the factors that mass media producers, critics, and even we ourselves, as consumers of entertaining stories, can influence personally through participating in popular culture.⁷

Notes

1. <http://www.un.org/unified/script.asp?scriptId=73>. The second part of the report, titled 'Larger Freedom', is by Secretary General Kofi Annan, who presented it at the Security Council meeting on 17 March 2005.

2. Martha Crenshaw, 'The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice', in Walter Reich (ed.) *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*. (New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998).

3. Metta Spencer, *Two Aspirins and a Comedy: How Television Can Enhance Health and Society* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2006), Chapter 6.

4. Andrew Buncombe, 'US Military Tells Jack Bauer: Cut Out the Torture Scenes ... or Else!' *The Independent*, UK, 13, February 2007.

5. George Jonas, *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

6. Bruce Hoffman, 'All You Need is Love: How the Terrorists Stopped Terrorism', *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2001.

7. The author thanks Anita Krajnc, Ken Simons, and Jonathan Spencer for their useful suggestions.

Metta Spencer is editor of *Peace Magazine* and Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Toronto, where she coordinated a program in peace and conflict studies.