

On Writing about the Publication of Depictions of Terror

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With a simple click, they appear regularly on our computer and smartphone screens, affecting our perception of and response to public acts of violence: technical images of violence in the context of violent terrorist acts.¹

In explaining the role of images in terrorist acts, the topos of the image as a weapon is often used.² This may have to do with the fact that terror pursues a dual objective. The intention of physical destruction is often accompanied by the calculated use of images of that destruction to generate terror and fear on a broad scale. They are meant to polarise society, and to spread binary ideologies threatening the lives of all people who think differently, as well as to recruit individuals or groups who sympathise with the cause. The *mediatization* of violence is an intentional part of the violence itself.³

The everyday use of internet-capable smartphones and social networks serves both journalistic and criminal purposes particularly well: “Every breakthrough in media technology is followed by a new form of terrorism.”⁴ The mass murder that took place in Christchurch on 15 March 2019, which the perpetrator himself recorded with a head camera and distributed via live-stream, seemed to mark a momentary climax in this interdependent relationship. Editorial departments and social media operators must therefore always ask themselves under which conditions images of terrorism can (not) be published and face the recurring discussion of potential complicity as soon as editorial publication strategies or social media terms of use do not distance themselves critically from the logic of terrorist orchestration.⁵

Yet it is not only the editorial departments and social media that are called upon to introspect, but also their users. Every act of reception and distribution increases the communicative range of terrorism. Although images of terrorism may be useful above all to those who commit the crime, they are produced not only by the perpetrators but often by eyewitnesses via their smartphones. In the hybrid space of mass media and social networks, the image sharing of even a single person can influence the visual in and output, as well as shape the stimulus and information balance of large groups.⁶ Certain user needs also contribute to a greater visibility of terrorism on the production, reception and distribution levels, consequently requiring explanation.

To point out the danger of satisfying the needs of sympathisers, potential imitators and onlookers who seek the visual thrill of dramatic transgressions as confirmation of their own vitality in being able to observe the suffering of others, media coverage is usually dominated by media-ethics and political arguments against the presentation, reception and distribution of images of terrorism. However, the images themselves and the conditions under which their affective impact emerges should not be neglected. For these account for the frequent occurrence of images of terrorism just as much as they determine people’s needs for using them.

Particularly in digitally networked, global image and image-based cultures, in which public interest is an important economic factor, a danger exists that images of terrorism will be used as “source of value”⁷ precisely because of their affective power.⁸ Great affective impact promises increased attention; at the same time it can compete with pictorial information potential, appearing to incite “as brief stimuli, an action . . . faster than thinking”.⁹ When affects are sometimes compared with “projectiles”¹⁰ because of their speed and impact intensity, it suggests yet another reason why images of terrorism are referred to as weapons. But even if these images do impair our ability to reflect, we are still not entirely at their mercy. Affect is not a “purely pre-reflective stirring of emotion, present only in the body of the subject”. Instead, it should be assumed that a dynamics of affect exists “between bodies”,¹¹ between images and those who use them. While viewing an image, it is precisely when someone feels a sensation that contradicts their fundamental ethical position that a conflict between their moral philosophy and their reception needs can arise, possibly even leading to feelings of internal alienation. Reflective distance, however, is necessary for this conflict to lead to introspection.

At this point an image-critical perspective on the conditions under which affective impact emerges as part of personal user needs becomes important – also in order to understand images of terrorism not only as sources of attention-grabbing sensationalism but also as analytical objects with their own critical potential. The drastic nature of the action in the image and the scope of action, which can be frighteningly similar to places in one’s daily life, must be considered, just like the indexical and

mimetic forces that have been repeatedly attributed to technical and digital images since the early days of photo-theoretical analyses, although they can visually express themselves in very different ways.

During or shortly after terrorist attacks, we are often confronted with chaotic scenes in blurry smartphone images, which affect us precisely because of their aesthetic of fragile illusion and tumultuous emotionality – such as on 14 July 2016. Several videos circulated in social and mass media shortly after a terrorist had driven a truck into the crowd gathered on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice during celebrations of the French national holiday. Over eighty people died, and hundreds were injured.

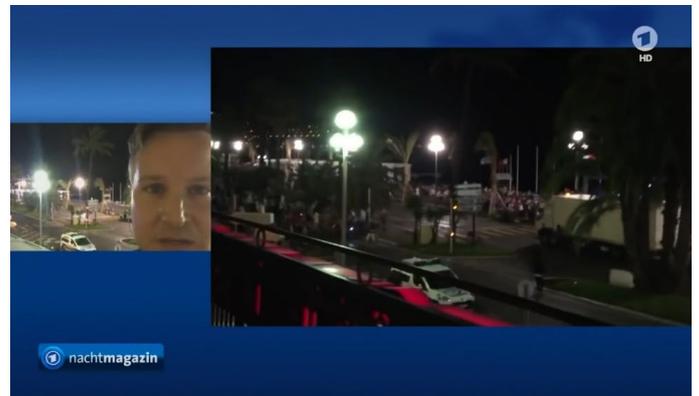
Journalist Richard Gutjahr, who happened to be at the site, filmed what probably was the most widely circulated video from the balcony of his hotel room. A truck is initially seen moving slowly along the street, which is blocked off for the festivities, before it suddenly accelerates. At the moment the truck appears to have reached the gathering of people, a row of lanterns and trees lining the street obscure the brutal event. But screams become audible, evoking horrible visions. The journalist zooms in on the street, where a commotion has already ensued. People flee in panic, running in all directions. Then shots ring out. For ethical reasons, Gutjahr quickly decided while filming to opt for (temporary) visual restraint and to forego a livestream. Seeking input on whether the video could be shown, he sent it to the Bavarian (BR), West German (WDR) and ARD broadcasting networks.¹² A short time later the journalist gave a live interview on the ARD late night news programme *nachtmagazin*. While he redescribed the scenes, his mobile phone footage was shown as authentication of the eyewitness report (ill. 1). The video immediately circulated around the world via countless television, online news, and social media channels.

Although Gutjahr's restrained reporting – particularly in the context of possible competition from the social networks, with their dynamic of high-speed image dissemination – was widely praised, he immediately faced critical comments from many Twitter users: "Folks, is the ethics discussion already starting? I DID NOT livestream. Sent the footage to BR,WDR, ARD. Where the professionals are."¹³ But the *taz* newspaper reacted to Gutjahr's tweet by writing: "The discussion about what can be shown is no longer only faced by professionals. Today, everyone has to ask him/herself whether what he or she is disseminating, this photo or video, should actually be disseminated."¹⁴ Although Gutjahr had acted prudently, he seemed predestined to embody the supra-individual media and education policy task of promoting self-reflection by critical users: The private individual with a smartphone and the journalist with an ethical duty to question his or her choices were inseparably linked.

In response to mounting criticism, Kai Gniffke, head editor of the ARD-*akuell* news programme at the time, also made his views known in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) several days after the attack. The video had to be

shown as a document of a socially relevant event, and this was also legitimate "especially because it was shot from a perspective that did not show people being killed."¹⁵ Although this may have been true of Gutjahr's video, one would have to consider not only the imaginative power of that film, but above all the first recordings from another source, which were broadcast in the *nachtmagazin* programme before the interview. Several injured and lifeless bodies could be seen on the street in a close-up view (ill. 2). These images undermined Gniffke's statement. Nonetheless, they were insightful and once again emphasised the necessity of the *taz*'s objection. A man standing in the foreground of the video clip turns his back to the camera to face the chaotic events on the street so that he can film the horrific scene with his smartphone. ARD thus showed a violent scene of the production of violent imagery, in which the questions of "showability" are condensed, questions that affect everyone, not just professionals. Likewise, the clip admonishes us as viewers of a viewer of terrorism whose actions appear improper to question our own sensationalist behaviour and unrestrained needs to record and document.

Videos capturing the attack from a close-up perspective immediately circulated around the world; some were even distributed by the newsrooms. *bild.de* published – without stating the source – a drastic video recorded by someone in the midst



1 – *Nachtmagazin*, ARD, broadcast during the night from 14–15 July 2016, screenshot with Richard Gutjahr (left) and his mobile phone video of the attack in Nice (right) [original link no longer valid]



2 – *Nachtmagazin*, ARD, broadcast during the night from 14–15 July 2016, screenshot [original link no longer valid]



3 – "... and suddenly the truck came out of nowhere!", bild.de, 15 July 2016, screenshot, online: <https://www.bild.de/video/clip/nizza-terror/neues-nizza-video-der-moment-in-dem-das-fest-zum-massaker-wurde-46853350.bild.html>, accessed 4 June 2020



Tweets zum Anschlag
Die schlimmsten Bilder der Terrornacht von Nizza

Nach dem Anschlag von Nizza, bei dem ein Angreifer in der Nacht auf Freitag mit einem Lkw durch eine Menschenmenge raste und dabei mindestens 84 Personen tötete, herrscht blankes Entsetzen. Besonders tragisch sind jene Kommentare und Bilder, die Augenzeugen direkt vom Tatort twitterten. Hier sehen Sie die erschütterndsten Tweets der Terrornacht von Frankreich.



4 – "The most horrible images of the night of terror in Nice", krone.at, 15 July 2016, screenshot, online: <https://www.krone.at/520026>, accessed 15 July 2016

of the crowd on the promenade: "... and suddenly the truck came out of nowhere", was the debatable headline. (ill. 3) At the beginning of the 40-second clip, people are watching a band perform, before the camera suddenly swings around 180 degrees to show the rapidly approaching truck. The music is drowned out by screams and other noises that cannot be described without eliciting gruesome imagery. For several seconds nothing is recognisable, as the person filming just barely manages to evade the truck. The recording ends following very blurry scenes of feet and faces.

The first-person perspective of the video suggests to us as viewers that we ourselves could be threatened, yet it will not come to that because it is now just media. This discrepancy between our own security and the plight of others morally calls our viewing into question. However, the more fragile the media boundary is or the greater the reduction of distance between the image and viewer appears, the more attractive the image seems to be as a focus of attention, and consequently the stronger the stimulus is to look at it. In addition to the dubious ethics of showing and viewing such images, the media boundary as a vitality-affirming distance is also in danger of being eroded by the affective forces of the images. The extreme images disseminated by bild.de can thus generate tremendous fear – especially when viewed in conjunction with other videos showing the consequences of the attack.

Shortly afterwards, the British sensationalist news platform *News This Second* published a gruesome eyewitness video on Twitter that explicitly showed bloody, deformed and dead bodies from very close proximity for over forty seconds. Several publications, such as the *British Mirror* and the Austrian *Krone Zeitung*, picked up the video. Although the news teams edited it afterwards to make the victims unidentifiable, the partial concealment – individual body fragments remained partially unpixelated – as a form of negation again stimulated the imagination, linking the depiction of violence with the idea of violence. (ill. 4) Despite being less pictorially explicit, it is all the more suggestive. Similarly, editorial third-party censorship on a visual level can trigger the same effect as a written warning (which also preceded this video) and motivate the viewer to search for an unedited version. At the time such a video could be found on Tanit Koch's Twitter page. The then head editor of the *Bild-Zeitung* newspaper apparently retweeted the British platform's text with the video, for which she was immediately criticised, prompting her to delete her message shortly afterwards.¹⁶

Drastic mobile phone images, in particular, such as those from Nice, possess a "power of seduction"¹⁷ through their affect intensity and suggest a high degree of authenticity – although their ease of post-production manipulation can raise doubts about their genuineness or even foster conspiracy theories. Many images of atrocities and terrorism, therefore, develop a "reality-generating power"¹⁸ with their affective and informational claims of immediacy that links them to the terrorism itself as a seemingly ubiquitous violence that can switch from latent threat to acute danger at any time or place. The potentialities of an image and the violence it shows enter into a union of effects, whereby images of terrorism can appear "seductive in their affective intensity"¹⁹ as well as "disastrous in their alleged impairment of the ability to reflect."²⁰ Image criticism plays an important role as a supplement to ethical and political media debates in tracing the connection between the fear of being overwhelmed by affective images, which themselves can be frightening, and the desire to view them.

- 1 In this case *technical images of violence* refers to photographs and videos.
- 2 See, for example, Charlotte Klonk, *Terror. Wenn Bilder zu Waffen werden*. Frankfurt am Main, 2017; Horst Bredekamp, *Der Bildakt*. Berlin, 2015, p. 24; see Gerhard Paul, *BilderMACHT. Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen, 2013, p. 567; Paul Virilio spoke in 1989 of the conquest of the mental world through the psychological effects of weapons as the primary goal of combatants. See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London, 1989, pp. 6–10; also Paul Virilio, *Krieg und Fernsehen*. Munich, 1993, pp. 16–17. The discussion here could include the connection between Habbo Knoch's "deed as image" and the *image as deed*, as it was discussed, for example, in the case of the murder of Nicholas Berg on camera. See Bernd Pickert, "Bilder als Waffen", in *taz – die tageszeitung*, 13 May 2004, online: <https://taz.de/!752078>, accessed 5 June 2020; regarding this case, see also Linda Hentschel, introduction, in Linda Hentschel (ed.), *Bilderpolitik in Zeiten von Krieg und Terror. Medien, Macht und Geschlechterverhältnisse*. Berlin, 2008, pp. 7–29, here p. 13; see also Franca Buss and Philipp Müller, "Hin- und Wegsehen. Formen und Kräfte von Gewaltbildern", in Buss and Müller (eds.), *Hin- und Wegsehen. Formen und Kräfte von Gewaltbildern*. Berlin & Boston, 2020, pp. 11–45, here p. 29, hereafter as Buss and Müller, 2020.
- 3 See, for example, the panel discussion from 8 November 2002 with Marion G. Müller, Martin Warnke, Peter Klöppel, Thomas Bade, Jay Tuck, Siegfried Weischenberg and Kai Hafez in Michael Beuthner, Joachim Buttler, Sandra Fröhlich, et al. (eds.), *Bilder des Terrors – Terror der Bilder?: Krisenberichterstattung am und nach dem 11. September*. Cologne, 2003, pp. 170–204. The connection between terrorist and media violence has been frequently described as a symbiosis. See, for example, Muhammad Ayish, "Employing of Media during Terrorism", in Mahmoud Eid (ed.), *Exchanging Terrorism Oxygen for Media Airwaves: The Age of Terroredia*. Hershey, 2014, pp. 157–172.
- 4 Bastian Berbner, "Wir Terrorhelfer", *Die Zeit* 35 (2017), online: <https://www.zeit.de/2017/35/journalismus-terrorismus-anschlaege-medienbilder-umgang/komplettansicht>, accessed 5 June 2020. Not reporting an event is not an alternative; such is the dilemma, because of the duty to inform the public and curtail conspiracy theories, which often seek to rely on alleged concealment through the media and state – especially when images and descriptions of the violent events immediately appear on social media networks.
- 5 See, for example, Buss and Müller, 2020, as in footnote 2, pp. 13–15; see Ulrich Raulff in an interview with Horst Bredekamp, "Wir sind befremdete Komplizen. Triumphgesten, Ermächtigungsstrategien und Körperpolitik", in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 May 2004; see Arno Frank, "Wir schauen nicht weg", in *Spiegel Online*, 15 March 2019, online: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/christchurch-und-das-internet-das-gestreamte-massaker-a-1258167.html>, accessed 10 June 2020; on complicity in the 9/11 attacks, see John B. Thompson, "Bilder als Komplizen", *ZEIT Online*, 20 September 2001, http://www.zeit.de/2001/39/Bilder_als_Komplizen, accessed 5 June 2020; on Eddie Adams' iconic photographs of the Vietnam War and the viewer's complicity, see Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, 2003, pp. 59–60, hereafter as Sontag, 2003; also Gerhard Paul, *Bilder des Krieges – Krieg der Bilder: die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges*. Paderborn, 2004, pp. 436–443, hereafter as Paul, 2004.
- 6 See Bernhard Pörksen, *Die große Gereiztheit. Wege aus der kollektiven Erregung*. Munich, 2018, pp. 12 and 88.
- 7 Sontag, 2003, see footnote 5, p. 20.
- 8 Although the decision to publish images of terrorism may stem from competing with other publications and, even more so, with social media networks, this hardly justifies it. In the visually organised business of news distribution, shocking images also threaten to become commonplace, possibly leading to a "visual spiral of violence". Marion G. Müller, "Burning Bodies. Visueller Horror als strategisches Element kriegserischer Terrors – eine ikonologische Betrachtung ohne Bilder", in Thomas Knieper and Marion G. Müller (eds.), *War Visions. Bildkommunikation und Krieg*, Cologne 2005, pp. 403–422, here p. 409. Gerhard Paul, for instance, has spoken of "visual arms races". Paul, 2013, see footnote 5, p. 593.
- 9 Claudia Emmert, "Die Rückkehr der Affekte. Künstlerische Strategien der Affizierung zwischen Inszenierung und Affizierung", in Claudia Emmert and Jessica Ullrich (eds.), *Affekte*. Berlin, 2015, pp. 20–33, here p. 22.
- 10 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus II. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*. Berlin, 1992, p. 488.
- 11 Julia Höner and Kerstin Schankweiler, "Affect Me. Social Media Images in Art", in Höner and Schankweiler (eds.), *Affect Me. Social Media Images in Art*. Leipzig, 2017, pp. 14–47, here p. 28.
- 12 Christian Teevs, "Der Lastwagen passte nicht ins Bild", *Spiegel Online*, 15 July 2016, online: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/richard-gutjahr-journalist-filmte-den-anschlag-von-nizza-a-1103106.html>, accessed 10 June 2020.
- 13 <https://twitter.com/gutjahr/status/753721819610378241>, accessed 4 June 2020; here in translation.
- 14 Jörn Kruse, "Drei, zwei, eins – live", *taz – die tageszeitung*, 16 July 2016, online: <http://www.taz.de/!5323665>, accessed 10 June 2020; here in translation.
- 15 Ursula Scheer in an interview with Kai Gniffke, "Wir dürfen nicht einfach draufhalten", in *FAZ.NET*, 19 July 2016, online: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/kai-gniffke-im-interview-ueber-herausforderung-des-streamings-14346602.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2, accessed 10 June 2020; here in translation.
- 16 Moritz Tschermak, "'Extrem drastisches Video', munter retweetet", in *BILDblog*, 15 July 2016, online: <https://bildblog.de/79577/extrem-drastisches-video-munter-retweetet/>, accessed 10 June 2020.
- 17 Stefan Fries, "Terroranschläge in den Medien: Brauchen wir diese Bilder?", in *Stefan Fries*, 16 July 2016, online: <https://stefan-fries.com/2016/07/17/terroranschlaege-in-den-medien-brauchen-wir-diese-bilder/>, accessed 10 June 2020.
- 18 Frank Fehrenbach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Der Impetus der Bilder*. Berlin, 2019, p. 73.
- 19 Gutjahr's video from Nice was implying "that you can't protect yourself from such attacks", so "people can no longer dare to be out in public spaces." Michael Hanfeld, "Und alle zücken ihre Handys", *FAZ.NET*, 15 July 2016, online: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/was-handy-videos-vom-massenmord-in-nizza-lehren-14342296.html>, accessed 10 June 2020.
- 20 Kathrin Busch, "Ansteckung und Widerfahrnis. Für eine Ästhetik des Pathischen", in Kathrin Busch and Iris Därmann (eds.), *»pathos«*. Konturen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffs. Bielefeld, 2007, pp. 51–73, see p. 52; here in translation.