Terrorism and Cultural Freedom (Birmingham, 7 Jun 16)

Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK, Jun 07, 2016
Deadline: Mar 31, 2016

Jonathan Harris

Terrorism and Cultural Freedom

Join us on 7 June for an intensive one-day discussion of the most critical issue facing the world, and the role and future of learning and culture within it. Though terrorism is associated currently with fundamentalism originating in the Middle East (and, for some, also with the response of western nation-states to it) forms of violent action against states, countries, cultures, groups and individuals has a long history.

Keynote speakers WJT MITCHELL, TARIQ ALI and ANTHONY DOWNEY will contribute incisive accounts of the stakes in this crisis, examining both 'terror' as an idea and its complex relations to a range of cultural and artistic practices, both historical and contemporary.

BCU provides a rich learning and research context in which to consider these issues. Papers will be given by BCU academics on a range of arts, cultural forms and modes directly implicated in the terror – in times both past and present. These include painting, cartoons, drama, film and performance. Universities are themselves implicated now in the state response to terrorism by western governments. The conference will enable this matter to be aired fully, as part of its critical review of the place and definition of cultural freedom in this new age of terror. Birmingham, as a global city, has a special significance in this debate and additional speakers with local interests will be added to the conference programme in the next few months.

Call for Papers:
If you would like to offer a paper on the impact of terrorism on a specific art form, practice or producer, please send a titled 200 word abstract to Jonathan Harris (jonathan.harris@bcu.ac.uk) by 31 March 2016.
Convenor and Chair: Jonathan Harris, School of Art, Birmingham City University

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS' ABSTRACTS

From Clones to Drones: Tracking the War on Terror
W. J. T. Mitchell University of Chicago

My 2011 book, Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9-11 to the Present, attempted to trace the role of visual and verbal imagery (metaphors, scenes, iconic moments) in the period that ended (I thought) with the election of Barak Obama in 2008. The Obama administration more or less open-

ly declared that the fatefully literalized metaphor of a “war on terror” would no longer be part of the administration’s rhetoric. In its place the euphemistic phrase “overseas contingency operations” would serve as bureaucratic Newspeak for assassinations and covert incursions by special forces, and for a determination not to be drawn into any more invasions, occupations, and “boots on the ground” in the Middle East. If cloning had provided the metaphoric frame for the Bush-era phase of the War on Terror, with its bio-political connotations of sleeper cells and the viral contagion of terrorist movements, drones provided the emblematic technology for the new precision-targeted and virtualized warfare. My talk will attempt to trace the evolution of the War on Terror from clones to drones, and to examine the role of images and image-destruction more generally in the conduct of this war.

Terrorisms Past and Present: Trajectories, Responses, Solutions
Tariq Ali, Independent Commentator; New Left Review Editorial Board

Terrorism has existed for many centuries. The first recorded conscious suicide terrorist was the unknown Spaniard who blew up a French armoury (and himself) during the Peninsula War in the nineteenth century. The different forms taken by terrorism have varied but the basic assumptions are, in most cases, the same. Most studies of the current wave of jihadi terrorism tend to be ahistorical, thus de-contextualising the object of study. A further problem is the general acceptance of double-standards by ruling parties and attached media outlets. The domestic and external responses by the State to the latest wave are both similar to the past (Ireland, Algeria, Palestine) and different. To obliterate or outlaw any serious discussion of causality and embark on repression of one variety or another is counterproductive on every level and merely prolongs the process. A different approach is necessary if the object is to return to a state of peace. There is also the problem posed by the terror deployed by the State in its responses to individual or group terrorism that has seen changes in law: the dumping of habeas corpus has led to imprisonment without trial, arbitrary arrests, states of emergency, etc. Leaving aside all other considerations the question has to be posed: is any of this effective?

Hermeneutic Suspicions: Contemporary Visual Culture, Insurgency, and the Future of Archiving Conflict in the Middle East
Anthony Downey Ibraaz.org; Sotheby’s Institute of Art London

A crisis in critical and historical interpretation has emerged in relation to the prolific number of digitized images that continue to flow out of the Middle East. This “hermeneutic suspicion”, a form of interpretative anxiety, affects how we understand the nature of events — specifically conflict-based events — and how they will be archived for future reference. This is not about an unwitting, aberrant, or accidental form of image-production; rather, this process involves the conscious, systematic and institutionalized presentation of visual material — deployed by insurgents, counter-intelligence agencies, and media outlets alike — that is strategically designed to produce doubt and suspicion in interpretative practices and image-based archiving. The emergence of iconoclasm as a key strategy in insurgent conflicts has added to this sense of interpretive anxiety. Recent events in Mosul, Nimrud, Tal Afar, Tikrit, and Palmyra, whilst not without precedent, have given rise to a number of questions associated with forms of “hermeneutic suspicion”: to what extent are these images being staged or re-enacted (complete with high production values and editing techniques); who are they being staged for; and, crucially, whose interests are being

served in the moment of their global dissemination and reception? As these conflicts, alongside their iconoclastic objectives, engulf large swathes of the region, it is notable that artists have been exploring precisely these dilemmas and focusing on the question of hermeneutics and archiving for some time now. A central component in these practices continues to be an exploration of how the increasingly digitized substance of conflict-based images, in terms of both dissemination and reception, has produced a systemic and perhaps irrevocable crisis in broader institutional and state-ordained archiving. Drawing on a number of pertinent examples, the following talk will propose discrete forms of cultural production based on “hermeneutic suspicion” that not only address and explore interpretive dilemmas but suggests speculative, if not more viable, strategies for archiving conflict in the Middle East.

Reference:

CFP: Terrorism and Cultural Freedom (Birmingham, 7 Jun 16). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 1, 2016 (accessed Nov 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/12331>.