"Introduction"

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TERRORISM AND ITS LEGACY IN GERMAN VISUAL CULTURE

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How else to get attention for one's product or one's art? How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence. (Sontag 23)

The idea for a special issue on visual depictions of terrorism in German culture came out of a graduate seminar on *Representations of Radicals and Terrorists in German Literature and Film in the 20th and 21st Century* that Maria Stehle taught at the University of Tennessee in 2011. Based on our discussions in the seminar, we decided to put together a special issue that examines, based on the German case, how historically traumatic events inform visual cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The specter of international terrorism has influenced the aesthetics of a wide range of artworks produced in and about Germany, from film to photography to visual art. A closer examination of these visual art forms aims to further develop the understanding of and vocabulary for dealing with the effects of both domestic and international social trauma. The articles in this special issue examine artists' representations of acts of terrorism and of their social and political effects. We analyze the aesthetic and social discourses in which these cultural products engage and how artworks

inform or influence audiences' concepts of and responses to terrorism and political violence. Our edited volume is positioned at the tail end of a surge of engagement with West German left-wing terrorism, the student movement and so-called "sixty-eighters," and the social and political legacies of the 1960s and 70s in general.[1] By also looking beyond Germany, we position this volume at the beginning of a more comprehensive scholarly engagement with visual depictions of violence and terrorism in a post-9/11 world. In Philip Hammond's introduction to the edited volume *Screens of Terror: representations of war and terrorism in film and television since 9/11* (2011), a collection of essays that seeks to "brings together European and North American scholars working in politics and international relations as well as in literature, film, media and cultural studies to take stock and assess the shape and significance of the post 9/11," (17) he writes:

After a decade of turmoil and instability in world affairs, after two wars that have left hundreds of thousands dead and injured, it may seem frivolous to focus on fictional film and television drama. The impulse to do so, however, is in part given by the nature of the war on terror itself, designed by its architects to be a media-friendly event. Staging the spectacle of 'war on terror,' complete with

sound-bites and photo-opportunities inspired by Hollywood, was an attempt to offset the Western elite's loss of purpose and vision, to fill the 'void of meaning' in Halland's phrase. It could never accomplish that. But what it did do—not so much through the meetings with entertainment industry executives as through its very failure and incoherence—was to prompt others to try to make sense of the contemporary experience of war and terror in ways that aimed to connect with popular audiences. (17)[2]

In our special issue, only the article by Thomas Riegler discusses mainstream Hollywood films in more detail; the other contributions relate their discussions specifically to the German example and discuss pop cultural, political, and commercial aspects of artistic representations of political violence. Most of the films we discuss and certainly the artist we introduce would probably understand their work as intending to "prompt others to try to make sense of the contemporary experience of war and terror in ways that aimed to connect with popular audiences," (Hammond 17) rather than as trying to re-establish the power and control of Western nations, here mainly Germany. We would argue that in most cases, the films are engaged in a project that tries to simultaneously do both: at the very least gain control of the representation, but also incite a critical discourse. The fact that terrorism *and* the fight against terrorism are media-friendly events also applies to Germany's specific past experiences with left-wing and global terrorism. This is certainly the case for the terror attacks during the Munich Olympics in 1972—a violent terrorist attack and global media event discussed in Thomas Nachreiner's article as well as in Sebastian Baden's interview with the artist Christoph Draeger—and the terror attacks of the RAF in the 1970s and into the 1980s. The filmmakers and artists we are discussing in this collection use sensationalism, the use of "the image as shock and as cliché" (Sontag), which makes their

products both effective and marketable, a fact that Noah Soltau illustrates in his discussion of the rather successful German film *Der Baader Meinhof Complex*. Most of the films and certainly the artwork, however, also make attempts to critically engage with the problem of violence and media sensationalism and the politics of fear. These two seemingly opposing aspects of "terrorism films" might suggest that they fail to send a clear political message and, consequently, remain politically incoherent. Anja Seiler's essay on the documentary film *Black Box BRD* and Eric Johnson's discussion of genre conventions in the film *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (*The Edukators*) and the vacillation between terror and terrorism film illustrate the complexity of this struggle for political coherence and complexity. Maria Stehle's essay on representation of children in films about terrorism shows that an honest engagement with questions of violence and representation confirms that there is no complete, easily digestible answer, but there are important political questions that need to be addressed. The continued struggle against and with global terrorism and the images this terror produces certainly confirms this point.

Our essays hope to spark further discussions about the complex questions surrounding images and digital images in a global media landscape. The increasing reliance on images over text, of breadth rather than depth of coverage in the digital age, adds urgency to this discussion that is only compounded by recent geopolitical events and their representations, which have as of this writing displaced 51 million people and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths.[3] When we can rely on the Instagram feeds of ISIS fighters for our breaking news from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, rather than in-depth print reporting or even the nightly news, the ability to parse and analyze the rhetoric and ideology of images becomes increasingly vital. Developing theoretical arguments about the representation of terror and terrorism from events that

represent less recent historical trauma creates an intellectual space for critical engagement that cannot be found in this morning's images of the battlefield.

With this collection, we hope to provide a blue print, a few initial possibilities, for ways in which we can productively critique artifacts of visual culture and the aesthetics of "terrorist" narratives. We view our work as part of a growing need to examine visual culture and incorporate it into wider contemporary cultural debates. As our everyday experience becomes increasingly mediated and digitized, we have to continue to work on new ways to critically engage that media.

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(**Endnotes**)

1. Historians have engaged with these topics for the last decade; for investigations of cinematic representations, see, for example, the work of Christina Gerhardt or Ilka Rasch; for representations in novels, see Susanne Rinner.

2. See http://www.americanquarterly.org/interact/beyond_delmont.html

3. Nick Cumming Bruce, "Refugees at levels not seen since World War II," *New York Times,* June 20, 2014, accessed June 20, 2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/world/refugees-at-levels-not-seen-since-second-world-war.html?_r=0.