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The Scenography of Suicide: Terror, Politics and the Humiliated Witness

The Politics of Suicide Bombings:
Horror and the Humiliated Witness

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I.

July 2003 A photograph appears in the world's newspapers.[1] A young woman lies on her back beneath the Moscow sky. Turning the page 90 degrees, she appears to be speaking, her mouth open, her hands poised in front of her body as if in animated discussion. But the composition and the framing of the photograph invite suspicion. The image includes a discarded drink can; she is lying amidst debris. It shows only the upper part of her body; we are looking at a torso. Her motionless posture and her closed eyes are not effects of the camera; this is a beautiful young woman in death. Moving from image to caption, in the move that seeks confirmation and explanation, but that always – even in the calligram – risks contradiction, the simplicity of any first – troubled, sympathetic, let us call it 'inter-human' - response to this image is complicated. The photograph's caption informs us that this is 'the body of one of the suicide bombers who unleashed an attack on a Moscow rock festival'. Like the painted text in Magritte's 'This is not a pipe', the caption cautions against the viewer's possible response to the image; it implies 'This is not a victim.'

Magritte's painting drew attention to the tension at the centre of the calligram. Because the calligram says 'the same' thing twice, there is always the possibility that the second 'saying' (the text) may not confirm the first (the image). The stasis of the calligram is a fragile one, because the movement between the image and the text, the blank space over which the eyes move, threatens to yawn open. Precisely where meaning is supposedly trapped and closed down, the possibility of negation opens it up once again.

In reading the caption, obliged to take our eyes from the image, any first response characterised by sympathy, is rendered inappropriate, *perhaps*, and we return to it with newly informed sight. The words 'suicide bomber' redirect or at least complicate sympathy. And they intend so to do.

This woman was one of two young women, (one of whom was confirmed immediately as) from Chechnya[2], who blew themselves up in the ticket queue to a rock concert in Moscow, killing themselves and thirteen others. The printing of this image is less controversial than Andreas Serrano's pictures of bodies in the morgue. By killing herself in this way, this young woman had given not just her permission but her 'instruction' to the world's media to circulate such pictures of the scene. Thus while the text contradicts or interrupts or complicates a response that responds because 'here lies another human being', there is also a challenge to be made as to the veracity of the text, as in Magritte's painting. Just as Foucault asked, who would seriously think those lines *were* a pipe, so one might ask who believes that this *is* 'the body of a

young woman'? Magritte intended to draw attention to the disappearance of 'the pipe' to which the painting and the painted words 'refer'. 'The 'pipe' that was at one with both statement and drawing – the shadow pipe knitting the lineament of form with the fibre of words – has utterly vanished,' Foucault writes. If the photograph resembles a victim, and if this 'first' affirmative (as Foucault terms it) is (potentially) disrupted and even displaced by the words 'suicide bomber', that disappearance of the appearance (semblance) repeats a disappearance – the 'utterly vanished' - of the woman herself, that is, not only of her life but of her dead body. That is, this is not a body, it is a photograph, a picture, an image circulating in the public sphere: it is publicity. What 'the matter' is here, is, quite literally, a printed image circulating in the world's media. In this sense, then, she *is* speaking. Through the materiality of the newspaper, she sends a political message; I am one of the most victimised, the unheard, the uncounted, of Chechnya.

These interpretive vacillations – she appears to be speaking/she is not speaking/she is speaking, she resembles a victim/she is not a victim/she represents the most victimised – are not of course confined to this image nor even to 'suicide bombers'. But the alternatives signal something of the questions at stake here, and of the gamble that suicide bombers enact insofar as they remove themselves from the role of explanation, leaving to others the obligation to respond to the scene created.

In part, this is simply to reiterate a familiar series of points: that several captions could have accompanied this image as it circulates the world's media; that the words by which we describe an event offers it a meaning that is never neutral; indeed, the choice of words by which we remember – a suicide bomber, a freedom fighter or shahid (holy martyr) – takes memorialising along a certain path so important that it enters into the political struggle itself. This was the first suicide bomb to take place in Moscow (there were earlier such attacks in southern Russia); but newspapers have become used to reporting suicide bombings, and the words make her mimicry of the tactics of Hamas the dominant interpretive context here, where the terms to be used are so highly contested. In Palestinian communities, posters and murals that appear on walls depicting the faces of mostly young men pitch a battle at those who would describe shaheed as 'suicide bombers'. Like the murals in Northern Ireland that appeared during the hunger strikes (of 1981 in which ten men starved to death in order to reclaim the label and thus the status of prisoners of war) and that similarly used portraits and text as public mnemonic technologies, the murals declare not only a refusal to forget these individual lives, but also a refusal to accept a description that accompanied and would undoubted follow (from those who opposed the political intent of those who participated and those who died), a description that refuses any logic of equality in their acts. These images display the faces and names of those who have died in this way as martyrs; they are attempts to recreate a low-tech mode of publicity that will circulate despite a mass media that, on the whole, remembers differently. We know, already too well, of discourse's power to 'deny and redouble', the power that is highlighted for Foucault in Magritte's 'This is not a pipe', playing as it does with the penetration of discourse into the very 'form of things'. But while in the painting 'words have surreptitiously introduced a disorder into the solidity of image, into its meticulous resemblance', the newspaper image operates according to the pretence of the calligram, with its aspiration to still the possibilities of seeing the image differently. The text orders, in both senses. It aims to give the world an order, and commands that this be how it is comprehended.

It may seem, therefore, that formulating a critical response to the dominant interpretive context consists in a challenge to language's order(ing), to insist on the alternative readings that one might make of this scene. This response insists that the scene can be read and labelled differently, that, for example, 'suicide bomber' and 'terrorist murder' are not the appropriate terms to use in order to comprehend the causes of this event. It entertains the notion that perhaps she is a victim, even the most victimised. The *political* question would thus be located at the level of the discursive, turning on how one categorises and thereby comprehends the bomber's actions.

But if we understand the political question in this way, have we simply denied the moments that *preceded* the reading of the text? Can the term discursive claim explanatory value over those moments in which the viewer is rendered exposed and vulnerable, grappling for the meaning of this image? What of the initial, confused, affective response? What of the initial pain we term 'sympathy' as one suspects this young woman has died too young and in a public space, or the sense of unease pervading the image and crystallised perhaps in the drink can strewn inappropriately close to her body? What of the suspicious sense of foreboding that jostles within the pull of the ethical, in which the other is asymmetrically placed in relation to the I, elevated over me? Must the vacillating responses to the image be understood as the confusion which is always ultimately to be discursively resolved, channelled and ordered, by the text? Must we understand the text as directing, redefining our response *post-hoc*, as it were? For does not the bundle of sensations that the materiality of the image 'holds' remain held there in the materiality of the photograph of the scene, as do the lines of Magritte's 'pipe', whatever we choose to say or write about it, however we decide to read its caption?

Of course to approach the phenomena of suicide bombings through consideration of a response to an image, is to run the risk of *aestheticising* politics, of approaching politics through aesthetic considerations. But a consideration of aesthetics is never more appropriate: such acts are absolutely about the production of images. To violently transform bodies moving in everyday routines into the smoking mangled burnt out wrecks of metal and body parts. This is the aesthetic task of such acts of terrorism. Whatever the 'goal', the product is a scene of devastation, a scene and an accompanying series of images over the adequate description of which survivors and commentators frequently struggle. Moreover, just as aesthetics concerns not just the making of an image but also, and crucially, the response to an image, so terrorism is not in the act but in the body of the one who responds to it (Taussig, 1989). It is this embodied response to terror that makes it appropriate to begin at the level of sensibility, in the vulnerability to exposure, to exteriority, that Levinas understood as the site of ethical responsibility.

The event of a suicide bombing is a political event that operates through the production of a scene of devastation to which one's responses are bodily, or pass through the body. To move too quickly to consider this scene through a politics of language is to ignore this response at the level of sensibility. And while such an analysis does not mean one remains at the level of the senses, that the analysis cannot remain at this level is not due to the apolitical or de-politicising tendencies of aesthetic considerations. On the contrary, it will be argued here that the politics of suicide bombings can be seen to operate *through* the aesthetic responses they produce, insofar as these responses are provoked and necessarily mobilise further

responses. In this exploration in which aesthetics and ethics provide the routes of analysis, it is important to insist that these acts remain *political*, that there is nothing 'mere' about an aesthetic route into the political, especially in the face of powerful figures who would seek to deny these acts political status. For there are, of course, those who seek to present suicide bombings as *only* horrific, as incomprehensible and as anti-political. So conceived, suicide and other bombings in Russia can be regarded not as in themselves political acts but as *impediments* to 'political' process underway in Chechnya.[3]

If, instead, the horror of that scene, and the confused responses it provokes, are understood as integral to the form of politics enacted, the questions become: What sort of politics is this, one that operates through sensation rather than opinion first? Is it possible to own a response of horror and of confusion, while understanding suicide bombings as political intervention? How precisely to think the event itself, its horrific and violent eruption in public space, as a political act as opposed to a sign of the limit of political?

II.

To turn to the work of Hannah Arendt at this point may seem counter-intuitive. With their combination of death, violence and murder, suicide bombings are hardly a model of political action that Arendt would applaud. 'Death', wrote Arendt, 'signifies that we shall disappear from the world of appearance and shall leave the company of our fellow men, which are the conditions of all politics.'(1969:67). Moreover, like death, violence is anti-political. Violence removes the possibility of speech, persuasion, debate. Suicide killing is a blow that appears outside the proper realm of the political, striking as it does at the everyday, the shared common spaces, where people mingle socially, its horizontality contrasting with the verticality that have characterised Israel's actions in Gaza and the West bank (according to Eyal Weizman, 2003). For these reasons, one might reasonably conclude that suicide bombings are not political in any Arendtian sense: they are anti-political, murderous attacks on the social. To argue in this way would be, in effect, to concur with what has become the US administration-led 'international community's' response to Russia's actions in Chechnya in which Russia's human rights abuses, once a source of disquiet and something that the US pressed Russia to address, have become re-articulated within the context of a war on terrorism.[4] The divorcing of the term 'terrorism' from 'the political' disenables any analysis that treats the terrorist event itself as political, even where, by way of concession, the latter term is relegated to a broader conception of 'causes'.

Here, rather than merely assert that these acts of violence are political acts, I want to push the argument through the two elements peculiar to suicide bombing that seemingly make it difficult to argue that this is political action in any Arendtian sense: the violent making of a scene of devastation and the disappearance of the event's principal actor. Focussing on these two elements, the analysis understands suicide bombings as a performative political intervention that operates not through force of argument or rhetorical brilliance, but, rather, that obliges response through its 'sensory' dislocation, its horrific

incomprehensibility. This is a performative, therefore, the effect of which operates less through a discursive or cognitive than through a sensory or embodied route.

Let me back up a little.

The accusation of aestheticising politics is a familiar one in the literature on Hannah Arendt. That politics is made equivalent to aesthetics, replacing political realities with non-political considerations, is a frequent accusation levelled at her political theory. For Arendt emphasised the space of appearance in which greatness could appear, in which men could achieve immortality through their actions (Villa, 1996). Moreover, in relation to her The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt has been accused of aestheticising the relationship of subject to state, regarding the state of terror as the imposition of a kind of 'mood'. There one finds her description of the experience of living under a totalitarian regime as an 'experience of the removal of the capacity for experience', a description which some have found puzzling, even 'mystical'.

Recently, Michael Halberstam (2001) has mounted a form of defence of Arendt insofar as his analysis places her work on totalitarianism in the context of the German philosophical tradition within which she was steeped and to which the aesthetic category of the sublime is key. Arendt's sometimes mystical-sounding pronouncements on totalitarianism can be understood, he argues, when placed within this tradition where the experience of the sublime has long been considered as one concerning the individual's relationship to the greater movement of self in nature and the world. For Kant, distancing himself from a Romantic notion of the sublime that had become an aesthetic category within German (and British) philosophy, Nature is 'not judged to be sublime in our aesthetic judgements [simply] so far as it excites fear, but because it calls up that power in us (which is not nature) of regarding as small the things we care about (goods, health and life).'

In the movement of the sublime the subject undergoes a *humiliation* of the imagination and the faculties of sense. The subject is cast back upon the self and referred to its own rational (in)capacity to grasp the infinite, supersensible purposiveness that seems to give meaning to the unity of nature and of self and world. It is thus a movement in the viewing subject that impresses upon the subject a *limit* to her capacities for grasping that supersensible meaning to which she is nevertheless referred, and in which she nonetheless seems to partake. This limitation cannot be thought or evaluated as such; it is experiential, a sensation. Thus 'while [for Kant] the experience of beauty is an experience in which the subject feels a harmony within itself and with the object of experience, the sublime is the experience of a dislocation with regard to what presents itself to the senses.'(Halberstam, 2001:116). The subject has the disarming feeling of dislocation precisely because s/he is presented with an empirical scene that through its capacity to excite fear or awe, directs her toward the infinite or absolute, while simultaneously illuminating her incapacity to grasp it. The sublime moves the subject but does a form of violence to subjectivity; it is 'a movement of sensibility that does violence to the very capacity for grasping the world on the level of sensibility.'(2001:116). This is why, for Kant, the sublime has 'a transcendental significance, for it recommends to the subject an overall relationship to sensibility on the level of sensibility itself' (Halberstam, 2001:116). This is not to say that the infinite or absolute can be experienced, just that the subject is prompted toward consideration of herself in relation to the infinite. To experience the sublime is

to experience a humiliated, uncomfortable and disarmed subjectivity, to be prompted toward consideration of the transcendental while never having the ability to confirm a greater purposiveness in Nature's - or the world's - movement.

Halberstam convincingly argues that, however implicitly, Arendt draws upon aspects of this German tradition. Indeed, although she doesn't use the word, Arendt figures the totalitarian sensibility as a species of the sublime. Her paradoxical description of the experience of living under a totalitarian regime as an 'experience of the removal of the capacity for experience' takes up moments in Kant and others after him within an account of how 'terror shapes the extreme self-world relationship of the subject under totalitarianism.' (Halberstam, 2001: 108). The notion of 'terror' is used in Arendt's theory to refer both to the literal terrorisation of society by the totalitarian machinery for making war on its own people, and at the same time to designate 'a complex sensibility of existential dislocation that according to Arendt affects the population broadly under totalitarian rule.'(2001:122). It is the *mood* by which people are obliged to live. The experience of terror here was akin to the existential dislocation associated with the sublime while the movement toward transcendence was exploited as the subject's awareness of inadequacy was 'resolved' by ideologies that purported to give meaning to the experience from which the subject is 'removed'. The subject was required to trust that there were those who had some greater capacity to lead the nation to fulfil, if not necessarily to comprehend, the higher purpose of Nature and history. Insofar as people did so entrust, they sustained the Nazi ideology that articulated a higher purposiveness, a law which could not be grasped but which could only be felt, which was embodied in a nation and a race rather than in a rational discourse, and which had to be followed.

It is this implicit link in Arendt between terror and the complex sensibility of existential (dis)location associated with thinking the sublime that has relevance within a discussion of suicide bombings. It is often remarked that fear freezes us in the present, *dislocating* us from the repetitions that tend to propel us forward through time; simultaneously, one might argue that its effect is precisely to *locate* us by its form of humiliation. In other words, faced with a scene of devastating violence, one is obliged to ask questions for which there are no immediate or correct answers. Such bombings provoke a series of confused and rapid questions in which the witnessing or watching subject struggles in a sea of present horror. The 'smaller' questions look backwards (who are the victims, what have we lost?) and they look to the future (what should I do? how shall I go on?). But this temporal freezing and uneasy dislocation has also the impulse to transcendence, the movement between subjectivity and objectivity. The bigger questions – of meaning, of the interchangeability of human lives (what is (my) life for, what is it worth? Why should I be saved and not him or her?) - are raised, and left unanswered. They are unanswered precisely because there is no possible experience of transcendence. There is rather only the prompting, the movement *toward* transcendence such that the subject's experience is caught in the tension between the subjective and the objective, rushing from one to the other. What is important, politically, here is that through the horror of the scene of devastation there is a prompting or referring toward transcendence.

In more Arendtian terms, one might say that the unexpected, violent scene interrupts 'our' becoming, reminding us simultaneously of our own finite lives, while simultaneously it prompts

consideration of life, and of the world, *as if* viewed from afar; and correlatively, of the relationship between one's individual existence and being-in-common. It forces both a private existential contemplation of being-toward-death and prompts a contemplation of larger movements of the world that must involve social and political considerations. There is, then, in the halting interruption of everyday life, the enforced pausing in the present, a scene that 'communicates' on the level of the senses. Through the experience of terror, broader questions concerning the realities and possibilities of a common world, can emerge as questions and hold the potential, therefore, of becoming political.

This is a scene, moreover, from which the principal actor disappears. Indeed, because the principal actor removes him or herself, there is no speaker-actor such as political action requires in Arendt's theory of political action. If we are prompted to ask 'why?', the principal actor does not remain to direct that search for meaning. Nor can the event of suicide bombings in themselves articulate the meaning of terror – its purposiveness – as part of a plan within which the witnesses are enjoined as did the ideologies of the totalitarian state as Arendt suggested. These events are not 'ideological' in that sense.

In relation to this 'silence', Maud Ellmann has written - with regard to the hunger strikers in Northern Ireland - that it is when there is a refusal to declare motives a hunger strike is transformed into a mere pathology or a suicide (1993:18). More generally, she suggests, it is 'the text provided by the terrorist that acts as its signature in the most performative sense of the word. Without it nothing is authenticated, no (terrorist) event can be said to have taken place.'(Ellmann, 1993:19). But while there may come a claim of 'responsibility', until that time and in itself the suicide bombing in Moscow does not itself bear a signature. This does not render it 'merely' a pathology or a suicide in this case, because of the killings and the creation of a scene of devastation that accompanies the suicide. While these aspects do not 'sign' the event as such, they communicate and thereby prompt a search for meaning. It is this search for meaning that requires that the event become discursive, a search for comprehension that entails the articulation of political perspectives and argument.

There is gamble enacted by the suicide bomber in this regard. The gamble is that while – and even because - she herself is removed from the scene, the movement toward transcendence involves raising *her* being-in-common as a question. In the context of education, Arendt wrote that each student has a double aspect: 'the relationship to the world on the one hand and to life on the other.'(PFF, p185)[5]. By abandoning one side of her double aspect, her relationship to life, the young woman in Moscow leaves us to consider her relationship to the world. Her relationship to 'the world', here, is not simply to refer us to her motivation, to a psychological state of mind or religious belief-system, as crucial and important as these may be on one level. It is also to refer us, through our inability to grasp it, through an inability to explain her let alone empathise with her, to her place in the world we shared with her: our humanity in *common*.

But this is not a simple form of empathetic identification. Indeed, the horror of her actions – the *in-humanity* of her murderous actions – cannot be divorced from the analysis. The question of her relationship to the world – in the Arendtian sense of the world-in- common - is raised, somewhat paradoxically, *as a result* of this inhumanity in the sense I have been arguing here and *without* passing through 'empathy'. Empathy requires a closing down of the distance between one and another, a

'comprehension' of her actions that frequently becomes a contemplation in terms of her life(-story) and her relationship to 'life', neglecting the crucial question of her relationship to the same world which I share(d) with her and which I continue to share with others after her departure and her act. The attempt to 'stand in her shoes' is to remove the distance between her and oneself, to attempt to 'identify' with or humanise her motivations. Those efforts to find in the psychology of the suicide bombers a psychological disposition or set of precipitating circumstances do just this, failing to see that these acts do not merely aim at the destruction of self nor even of the enemy.[6] Motivation in terms of a personal calculation or life-narrative (my life as hopeless or worthless, my future reputation as hero, my action as those of a martyr) accompanies but does not constitute what must be a different kind of performative analysis. Whether or not the individual involved regards her action as revenge or a mode of making her life worth something (their 'illusio', as Ghassan Hage (2003) describes it, after Bourdieu) the insertion she makes is an attempt to bring attention not to her individual life(-story), but to the shared level of the interhuman, of common humanity, of the world. This she has done through acting inhumanely, creating a scene of devastation faced with which we are cast into contemplation of the shared world.

Rather than trying to resolve the *dislocating* effect of such acts of terrorism via either outraged condemnation or empathetic comprehension, therefore, this analysis suggests that one allows the dislocation to *locate* us as in the common world, but also as not only shocked but limited and humiliated. The humiliation is not only a Levinasian 'ethical' humiliation in which one is responsible for the others' response, and therefore implicated in her actions (led by the question 'how could "we", "I", have produced her response?'); but it is a humiliation in that one has to accept limitation, the impossibility of the transcendence – of seeing or knowing the movements of 'the world' - to which we are nevertheless referred. As with aesthetics (art) one is prompted to articulate a response in words to something received on the level of sensibility and to give an objective judgement from a necessarily subjective position. One is therefore faced with an obligation whose impossibility haunts the most sincere of attempts to comment.

III.

In this sense, then, political discourse does not 'order' the level of sensibility exactly, because the effect - indeed, the affect - of the horror runs through into political discourse without causing it and without being 'expressed' there[7]. There is only a 'prompting'. And while the movement toward transcendence, understood here as the search for a place from which to comment on the shared world *as if* viewed from afar, lends any commentary on the event its inflection[8], all commentary will, in the face of this task, necessarily fail. For the commentator faced with the scene of devastation is referred to the nature of the world-in-common without ever truly being able to see or know it. In this experience of limitation and humiliation, the 'big' questions concerning the movements of the world arise but will remain unanswered; their impossibility can only haunt the attempts to make sense of such events.

How one should respond to the prompting - in other words, the manner in which one connects this event to other aspects of the world-in-common - is of course highly contested. That contestation constitutes the political debate.

Russia's official narrative regarding Chechnya connects suicide bombings such as the one described above to other aspects of the common world by regarding them as forms of repetition or mimicry. Thus the actions of the woman suicide bombers in Moscow have been rendered into political discourse as a mimicry of the strategies of Hamas and Islamic jihad. Moscow emphasises this repetition, enabling a connection between Russia's activities in Chechnya as part of the war on terror with the actions of the United States post- September 11th. The 'war on terror' discourse has become hegemonic, enabling an alignment by which Russia justifies its actions in Chechnya as defensive while characterising the actions of the suicide bombers as evidence of an Islamic fundamentalist offensive whose goals are 'otherworldly'.[9]

But, to stay with this notion of connection understood through the notion of mimicry, the suicide bomber is also arguably enacting a form of mimicry in two further ways, ways that are eclipsed by the power of the current discourse of 'war on terror'. These provide the grounds of intervention for a discourse critical of Russia's actions and the 'war on terror'. An alternative, second, sense in which her actions, while involving the most singular act of suicide, enact a form of mimicry, is insofar as her disappearance arguably mimics that of the 'disappeared' within Chechnya. If her actions prompt one to connect her being-in-the-world with the Chechen people's current daily existence, one's political reflections may well lead one to emphasise the numbers of Chechens who have 'disappeared'. During the hostilities that began in 1999[10], Russian troops have conducted large scale 'sweeps' of entire communities in which the registration documents of all residents are checked, as well as 'targeted operations' where a household or street is checked, allegedly to uncover those involved in 'rebel' activity. According to Human Rights Watch:

> 'Persons detained in such operations are frequently held at unofficial detention facilities. They are always questioned but almost never given access to legal representation. In many cases detainees are tortured or otherwise mistreated, or executed. Authorities frequently deny that the persons detained in such operations are in their custody. … Russian forces have detained tens of thousands of civilians in this manner. Most are released within days or weeks. But some are never seen again. Relatives of the 'disappeared' victims know nothing of their fate, and lack even the remains, unless the bodies were discovered later in an unmarked grave.' (http://hrw.org/reports/2002/russchech02/chech0402-01.htm (accessed 10/9/03).

Despite the ending of large-scale hostilities in Spring 2000, and despite Moscow's claims that the war is over and that a normalised political life is establishing itself in Chechnya - a claim that the recent murder of President Kadyrov[11] shows was never the case - these disappearances have continued. The Russian human rights group Memorial documented 294 'disappearances' between January and November 2003, including 47 people whose corpses were later found in unmarked graves or dumped by the roadside; the group estimates the real number was three or four times higher (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/29/russia7248_txt.htm accessed 10/5/04). In the first quarter of 2004, 78 people were abducted in Chechnya, 41 of whom subsequently 'disappeared' (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/04/07/russia8408_txt.htm, accessed 10/5/04). Moreover, in 2003 the Human Rights Watch reported that the Russian forces were increasingly resorting to blowing up the bodies of executed Chechens, a ploy that eradicates signs of torture, obscures causes of death and makes identification difficult.[12] Through their interviews with Chechens, mostly in the refugee camps in

Inghusetia (since Russia has disallowed <u>Human Rights Watch</u> into Chechnya), this organisation has been able to gather stories of the disappeared, the executions and the tortures of which the Russia forces are guilty. In 2003, the conviction of one high ranking officer, Colonel Yuri Budanov, for the murder of a young Chechen woman was an exception that proves the general rule that this behaviour continues unchecked.[13] More recently, in another rare trial, four officers were acquitted of the murder of six civilians upon whose vehicle they had opened fire in southern Chechnya. They had killed two of the passengers and then proceeded to execute the surviving passengers to cover up their mistake, leaving the vehicle burnt out in the pretence that it had hit a landmine. They were found by the court in Rostov, southern Russia, to be just following orders (The Guardian Weekly, 13-19th May 2004, p14).

Thus the suicide bomber mimics the victims, the 'lost', her violent scene referring us to the gallery of relatives holding photographs of their loved ones who have 'disappeared', a series of images which is available to be circulated (via the internet) but which does not have the force of her own image-making enterprise[14]. Hers is a violent act that can be connected with the violence of life in Chechnya, where civilians are, by Russia's own statistics on crime, at an extraordinarily high risk of being murdered. In 2002 1132 civilians were killed, between 10 and 15 times the rate for Moscow (http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya (accessed 10th September 2003). This mimicry is not therefore simple a strategy of rendering 'the same' (according to a logic of equivalence in killing, an eye for an eye logic), but is a terrorist strategy that prompts the witness to connect the effect of terrorism (the embodied reaction that continues because 'it could happen again' and 'people like me, my loved ones or indeed I could have been there') with the thought that equally, but for an accident of birth, one could have been Chechen or in Chechnya. This latter, 'heteropathetic' thought is not a form of empathy, but an ethical connection that holds open the distance between the observed and the witness; as opposed to a sentiment of 'I understand' or 'I am like you' it takes the form 'I could have been you, but I am not you.'(see Silverman, 1996; Radstone, 2001). That this connection might be made, however tentatively, is the 'gamble' referred to earlier.

Another discourse, equally critical, would connect things differently by emphasising a third form of mimicry by which the suicide bombers' bloody orchestration of events are viewed in relation to the actions of President Putin. Insofar as she removes herself from the possibility of justice and refuses to make herself subject to law - she exempts herself - her mimicry is of the Russian government, and more specifically of Putin. Within Russia, it is well documented that Putin has removed himself from criticism by taking control of television and media reports as well as by closing down some significant NGOs, and that he allows the Russian troops in Chechnya to act within a 'culture of impunity'. There has been a

> 'creeping securitization of information. The government has increasingly restricted reporters' abilities to investigate the war, efforts to provide details on abuses and atrocities by the federal forces, and access to information on casualties. Russian journalists who have gone beyond these restrictions have been punished.
> The war in Chechnya has helped to embolden the military and the FSB (Russian security forces), institutions that have not been reformed since the Soviet era, and at the same time diminish an already fragile rule of law. It has been central to the culture of impunity that has developed

among the 80,000 federal forces currently stationed in Chechnya, where few soldiers have been prosecuted for abuses, although more than 10,000 complaints have been filed. The troops are getting the signals from the minister of defence, former KGB Col. Sergei Ivanov, that he is sympathetic to their conduct, even when it involves murdering civilians.'(Mendelson, 2000:64).

As regards international law, the Human Rights Watch reports quoted above clearly show how Russia is in contravention of the International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which the Russian federation is a signatory.[15] But Putin's powers of (sovereign) exception are such that he has not even attempted to suspend Russia from those parts of the ICCPR and the ECHR which, remarkably, allow certain rights to be derogated (suspended) in exceptional circumstances, if the signatory state informs the other members (in the case of the ICCPR) or the secretary General of the Council of Europe (in the case of the ECHR).[16] Seemingly, Putin's relations with the West are such that his signature on these treaties counts more than his willingness to abide by them. UN Commission on Human Rights resolutions in 2000 and 2001 were weakly worded expressions of concern calling on the government to 'among other things, establish an independent national commission of inquiry to investigate human violations on both sides of the conflict, and to facilitate visits to the breakaway republic by five UN thematic mechanisms: the special rapporteur on torture, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, the special rapporteur on violence against women, the special representative of the secretary general on internally displaced persons, and the special representative of the secretary general on children in armed conflict.' No commission of inquiry has been established, and only representatives of the last two of the thematic mechanisms (on internally displaced persons and on children) have been admitted into Chechnya. (www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya accessed 10/9/03; www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/29/russia7248_txt.htm accessed 10/5/04).   In 2002 the UN Commission on Human Rights rejected a resolution that would have expressed concern about the Chechnya conflict (www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya accessed 10/9/03).   In January 2004 the Human Rights Watch again produced a briefing to the UN Commission on Human Rights requesting a strong resolution condemning ongoing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by both parties, as well as urging the establishment of a genuine accountability process for these abuses; calling on Russia to desist from coerced returns of internally displaced persons and to ensure their well-being; calling on Russia to invite those key UN thematic mechanisms, in particular the Special Rapporteurs on torture and extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and urging Russia to agree to a new Organisation for Security and Cooperations in Europe (OSCE) mandate for Chechnya (www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/29/russia7248_txt.htm accessed 10/5/04).). One recent development the briefing highlights is the harassment in recent years of applicants to the European Court of Human Rights has been reported by NGOs.[17]

Where there is no normalised public sphere, human actors can no longer expect their plight to be heard. The suicide bombing's gruesome form of publicity speaks of the 'politicide' (Mbembe, 2003) that has occurred within Chechnya. In an article entitled 'Russians' rights imperilled: has anybody noticed?'

Sarah Mendelson argues that there is a 'permissive international climate' within which Russia's systematic human rights abuses in Chechnya are overlooked as it is welcomed as a democracy. Writing in 2002, Mendelson speculated: 'Perhaps some momentous domestic event will galvanise public opinion and push Russia to engaging in behaviour more consistent with Western conceptions of human rights and democracy.'(2002:68). This suicide bombing, the first in Moscow, arguably aimed at just such a provocation.[18]

However, the discourse of a war on terrorism has furnished Putin with an international framework than seemingly trumps international humanitarian law, not to mention domestic law (Mendelson, 2000). As Mendelson (under)states: 'the level and number of norm violations that are tolerated over time by so many parts of the international system suggest that the threshold for non-compliance is extremely high, and that human rights norms are less robust than is commonly believed.'(2002:68). In this sense the young woman's suicide killings demonstrate – she is a monster who shows (montre) – her being-in-common, in the sense that she paradoxically demonstrates - she points to - a common world that is being ruled by those who would have us locate our fears in the image of the terrorist rather than in a world order in which the most powerful of world leaders are able to act beyond the rule of law.

In these three ways, and no doubt in others besides, the actions of these young women suicide bombers are rendered 'comprehensible' within political discourse in as much as they are connected with other aspects of the shared world. But if a hesitation or incompleteness accompanies even the most strident of 'explanations' of suicide bombings, perhaps this is due to the fact that to render into political discourse what communicates through the experience of horror, through horrific imagery and its after effects, is to change register. In the move from the level of sensibility to that of rational discourse, from the subjectively felt to the intersubjectively communicated, the level at which politics must be conducted, there is if not a hiatus[19] then an incomplete 'translation'. The discursive level cannot claim to 'express' the embodied level of sensibilities that these events register in the bodies and minds of those who suffer and witness them. Even as that level (of sensibility) prompts a search for transcendence, as was suggested in the previous section, this is not to be attained within a 'political' understandings of events. The larger questions – which demand a clarity about the movements of the world-in-common – cannot be answered once and for all. Indeed, all one can hope is that something of the necessity of posing these unanswerable questions continues to haunt the political debates since debate itself is sustained by the impossibility of their adequate resolution.

IV.

Presently, political controversy seems to be staged across a divide by which those who focus on the horror and inhumanity of suicide bombings set themselves against those who understand the event from the bomber's 'point of view'. The former are appalled by the implication that there might be some justification for the killing of innocent victims, while the latter insist that the focus should be on the political context that 'caused' the protagonist to act in this murderous fashion. By contrast, the contention here has been that when regarded as a performative event, the actor can be seen to raise profound

questions about the world – the questions that are, as Arendt understood, always 'at stake' in politics – *through* the creation of the scene of devastation. The 'aesthetic' impact of the scene dislocates the witness as well as simultaneously *locating* her/him in this world in which such things happen. This location is a prompting to consider the world-in-common, the movements of the world in a parallel sense to that in which the notion of the sublime has been employed to describe a sense in which the particular can have the ability to usher forth a feeling that there may be a supersensible purposiveness to Nature. At this prompting, the subject is humiliated and limited, since s/he becomes aware of the impossibility of adequately answering such questions, while 'ethically' her/his task is to attempt some articulation of the connections so prompted. There are a number of implications that follow from this analysis. First, as opposed to the two being separable, the political questions are seen to be raised *through* the sensible impact of the horrific event. Thus and secondly, it is exactly because the victims are innocent and the act inhumane that the bomber strikes; in other words, it does not make sense to 'fight' such a terrorist threat by pointing out this fact. Thirdly, it is exactly because it is horrific and leaves no actor to articulate its 'meaning' that these profound questions are prompted; so that it detracts from the *political* impact to comprehend the event empathetically if that has the effect of diminishing its inhumanity, its horror or its terrorist impact on everyday life.

Of course this argument relies upon the event having such an effect, just as the act itself relies upon it. Relatedly, there is the gamble that the suicide bomb *will* prompt such a consideration of the world-in-common, that his or her common humanity will, by being placed in question (that is, by her *inhumane* act), become integral to the political debates that ensue. Where these events become normalised, where the horror is lessened, reported, depicted, and perhaps even *experienced*, as merely another terrorist attack, where witnesses and commentators become 'numbed' to the potential impact, there is the danger that political debate begins to contract, that the questions concerning the world-in-common are further eclipsed. The attempts to articulate a world-in-common in which the witnesses, victims and perpetrators can be viewed in their interrelations and their commonality ('as if' from afar) then begin to struggle in the face of any '(war on) terror' discourse that requires only that such events are connected to previous similar events and to possible similar events in the future. The fear is that there is then a spiralling of audaciously executed violence as the impact of the horror needs to grow exponentially in relation to the power of such a discourse.

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[1] The image appeared in The Guardian Weekly July 10-16th 2003 p4.

[2] Russian officials identified one of the bombers from a passport. She was Zalikhan Elikhadzhiyeva. She was just twenty years old, from the Chechen village of Kurchaloi.

[3] This is so despite widespread suspicion among independent observers in relation to the referendum in March 2003 and the elections in October 2003 which Russia's favoured candidate,

Kadyrov, won as was widely expected. Chechnya's 'rebel separatists' are widely suspected to have been behind Kadyrov's recent murder (9th May 2004).

4 It is true that there is an Islamic fundamentalist element to Chechnya's war – see endnote 9 below – but the link to Al-Queda has been made in too casual a fashion along with the blanket use of 'terrorism' within the discourse of 'war on terror'.

5 Writing about education, Hannah Arendt stated that the child has a double aspect: a relationship to life – to his or her own becoming - and to the world. Education has to attend to both of these aspects of childhood. 'These newcomers, are not finished but in a state of becoming. Thus the child, the subject of education, has for the educator a double aspect: [the child] is new in a world that is strange to him and he is in process of becoming, he is a new human being and he is becoming a human being. This double aspect ... corresponds to a double relationship, the relationship to the world on the one hand and to life on the other.'(PFF, p185).

6 That is, the use of suicide bombers is not as a killing strategy but as a weapon of terror. The bombs are not solely intended to kill but as a manoeuvre in a wider strategy. Thus it is not contradictory when from time to time it is reported that Hamas fear that the bombings carried out in their name are getting out of control. They do not aim to use this strategy to remove the enemy, and need the times between killings to allow the Isarelis to respond, to consider, to concede.

7 Brian Massumi might speak of an 'excess' of affect here, that is not captured in political discourse. See his chapter 'Too Blue' in Parables of the Virtual (2000). The hiatus between ethics and non-ethical practice of politics, as understood by Levinas or Derrida, is therefore less a hiatus than a translation from one human capacity to another, as long understood in aesthetics.

8 Much as Derrida speaks of the impossibility of pure forgiveness that nevertheless and indissociably inflects politics as it engages in reference to a '"hyperbolic" ethical vision of forgiveness' that can inspire response and responsibilities (2000:51).

9 The Islamic aspect of Chechnya's troubles is complex. The radical Islamic elements - the Wahhabis – were seeking power, and when President Maskhadov was in place they had made several attempts to assassinate him. They were/are themselves comprised of two distinct elements. First they were the Daghestani Wahhabis who had left Daghestan for Chechnya in Spring 1998 because of the political clashes that their stricter version of Islam had brought about between themselves and others, especially Sufis, in a state based on already fragile political compromise between Daghestan's diverse ethnic and religious communities. The Wahhabis were a small minority group in Daghestan but they posed a serious challenge and after the political clashes in Spring 1998 some Wahhabis managed to set up some pockets of independent territory within Daghestan (in May 1998), where they lived – from September 1998 with Russia's support - under shariah law. In doing so they undermined the established political order that had attempted to embrace diversity without territorializing different ethnicities. Daghestan had attempted to protect diversity by creating a State Council of 14 representatives of its ethnicities, with a rotating chairmanship. This gradually came apart as a corrupt ruling elite took power (managing to repeal the rotation of chairmanship) which has kept one ethnic group (the Dargins) in power. Anti-Wahhabi legislation was passed by the council and, in 1997 legislation was passed that prohibited Salafi (Wahhabi) schools, literature and mosques. Khattab's raid on Daghestan in December 1997 was presented by Moscow as a first sign of Chechnya's expansionism. However, although it was launched from Chechnya few Chechens were involved, and Khattab himself was likely to have been posing as a liberator of Muslims from the Russian yoke in order to enhance his own marginal status. Chechnya and anti-government Chechen groups distanced themselves from his actions. Suspicion and repression of dangerous religious differences within Daghestan increased and approximately 300 Wahhabi families left Daghestan for Chechnya. Once in Chechnya, some joined forces with a second set of Wahhabis who were more militant. This second group were anti-government militias associated with criminality and hostage-taking; they did not enjoy even the small minority support that the Wahhabis had received in Daghestan. This combined group became a source of disquiet for Chechnya's internal politics. Later there were attempts by some to 'return' to Daghestan and to sieze power there (Baguaidin's return to his village in Tsimudin, 2 August 1999; Shamil Basayev's attack in Botlikh region of Daghestan, 7 August 1999). Their avowed purpose was to install an Avar President of a joint Daghestan and Chechen Islamic republic. They had miscalculated; local militias in these regions confronted and

in some cases defeated their attackers before federal forces arrived. Again, this was seen as Chechen expansionism, despite the fact that those attacking were in fact Daghestani Wahhabis (Landskoy, 2002).
See also Euben (2002) for the argument that Islamic jihad should not be regarded as otherworldly because it includes a profoundly this worldly aspect, seeking something for the human arrangements on earth, for arrangements of land and power.

[10] Putin's deployment of Russian forces into Chechnya in October 1999 meant that Putin was not going to support Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov in his struggle against radical elements within Chechnya. A year earlier Maskhadov, after having attempted to incorporate his political enemies into his government, had asked for Russia's military support against the radical elements - the Wahhabis – who were seeking power, and had made several attempts to assassinate him. After the rebel forces attacked neighbouring Daghestan (from where in fact many of them had recently fled, so that these attacks were in fact attempted 'returns' of sorts), and bombs blamed on Chechen forces exploded in Moscow apartment blocks in September 1999 killing in the region of 200 people, Russia launched its military campaign.
By Spring 2000 Russian troops controlled most of Chechnya and large scale hostilities ended. Since then, Chechen rebels have continued to ambush Russian troops, and Russia's security forces have continued in what Russia presents as an anti-terrorist operation. Suicide bombings by Chechen 'rebels' began in 2003.

[11] Kadyrov was killed when a bomb planted at the stadium in Grozny where he was taking part in celebrations of Russia's victory over Nazi Germany exploded on 9th May 2004. His election (in October 2003) was regarded with suspicion. He was Moscow's attempt to give an impression of democratic normality. Kadyrov was regarded as a traitor by many Chechen rebels among whom he would at one time have been counted. In the past he had been a Muslim cleric and fought against Russian forces in the 1994-6 war. But in 1999 he became a Putin ally, and was appointed as Chechnya's top civilian administrator in 2000. Kadyrov was seen as Putin's man in Chechnya and although he did criticise the behaviour of Russia's troops and request more localised powers, which allowed both Putin and Kadyrov to counter claims that he was Putin's puppet, he did not voice or support any call for the republic's independence.

[12] Of thirty-eight cases in January and February 2003 in which the bodies of Chechens were found, in twenty of these the body had been blown up. (p16 HRW my print out).

[13] Yuri Badanov was the first and most senior Russian soldier to go on trial for human rights abuses in Chechnya. He was found guilty of abducting and murdering 18-year old Elza Kungayeva, and sentenced to ten years in jail (The Guardian, Saturday 26th July 2003).

[14] The human rights abuses in Chechnya and in the camps in Ingushetia where displaced peoples have fled are underreported. Medicins San Frontiers has listed Chechnya as one of the top underreported humanitarian (crisis) stories in the world. This is in large part due to the control of the media and NGOs exerted from Moscow.

[15] Both allow states to suspend (or derogate) some of their provisions in times of national emergency, but only to the degree strictly necessary under the circumstances. (HRW).

[16] The right to life and protection from torture can never be derogated under the ICCPR and in the ECHR the protection from torture can never be suspended, and the right to life can only be in relation to deaths resulting form lawful acts of war.

[17] In June 2002 an applicant was 'disappeared', and in May 2003 Russian forces extrajudicially executed another applicant and her family. NGOs report further cases in which applicants and their families have received threats
(www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/29/russia7248_txt.htm accessed 10/5/04).

[18] August 2nd 2003 a suicide truck bombing killed 35 at a Russian military hospital in southern Russia. At that point, suicide bombings had killed more than 100 people in three months. More recently the murder of President Kadyrov could be regarded as another instance of attempting a 'momentous domestic event'.

[19] As Derrida, following Levinas, would have it (for discussion see Critchley, 1999).