Losing the Plot:

Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism

Counter-terrorist practitioners and policy makers appear to be very interested in narrative. They often describe the worldview of violent Islamist groups and movements as the 'jihadi narrative', while their efforts to confront terrorist propaganda are usually labelled as 'counter-narrative' or 'alternative narrative'. However, while the counter-narrative approach has gained widespread acceptance in governments, think-tanks and civil society organisations, it is built on very shaky theoretical and empirical foundations. Some valuable theoretical contributions to the study of violent extremist narrative have been made by psychologists in particular, but there is one discipline which is conspicuous by its absence from the field: literary studies.

This paper makes a case for the value of studying violent extremist narratives as narratives in the literary sense. By employing the tools and techniques of literary criticism, violent extremist communication can be revealed as not only potentially persuasive, but also creative and aesthetically appealing: terrorists inspire their followers, they don't merely persuade them. Understanding the creative sources of this inspiration is vital if counter-narrative is to succeed in presenting an alternative to the propaganda of violent extremist groups.

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

1. Introduction[1]

Narrative is now at the forefront of concerns about terrorism, or violent extremism, and 'counter-narrative' is frequently advanced as a principal means of preventing terrorism/violent extremism. And yet counter-narrative is fraught with problems – from lack of evidence that it actually works to lack of conceptual clarity – which reduces the likelihood that counter-narrative approaches will reduce the terrorist threat or the incidence of radicalisation. With these problems, however, comes an opportunity: thinking about how terrorists actually use narrative may help us to understand how they make their causes appealing – and thus help guide or calibrate the response.

This paper makes three arguments. The first is that counter-narrative approaches to violent extremism are currently built on weak foundations, theoretically and empirically, and therefore it makes little sense for governments, multilateral bodies and civil society organisations to continue to invest scarce resources in such approaches until those foundations have been strengthened. The second is that terrorist ideologues often *are* literary authors and storytellers, and indeed narrative may actually be fundamental to what they do and how they communicate. Therefore, counter-narrative is by no means a lost cause, but it needs to be done better, and this paper's third argument is that there is much to gain by bringing to this task the tools of literary studies, the academic discipline which surely has a claim to primacy when it comes to narrative. To test this argument, the paper attempts a simple demonstration of a literary analysis of a violent-extremist text – a videotaped speech by Osama bin Laden – in order to show that responding to the literary dimension of terrorist propaganda is revealing, productive, and potentially useful for counter-terrorism policy-makers and practitioners.

2. Counter-Narrative and Its Problems

Counter-narrative is largely the product of government policy-makers and civil society practitioners, rather than academics, so it is hardly surprising that it lacks a fully articulated theory. What we have instead of a theory are a set of assumptions, implicit and explicit, which are common to a wide variety of documents; by setting out those assumptions, we can arrive at what might be termed the working theory of counter-narrative. This runs as follows. Violent extremists – by which we usually mean violent Islamists – recruit followers through promoting an ideological worldview that is encapsulated in what is often termed the 'jihadi narrative'. This narrative claims that Muslims are under attack and must fight to defend themselves; that the West is an implacable enemy of Islam; and that violence is not only necessary for survival but is also a route to salvation.[2] This narrative can be defeated by more compelling and truthful narratives that promote humane values. As former British prime minister Tony Blair announced in 2015, "[w]e need to build up grassroots Muslim responses which challenge the Jihadi narrative with simple competing and clear messages which are equally forthright and scripturally based".[3] As a result, the appeal of violent extremism

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[2] For al Qaeda's version of this 'narrative', see A.P. Schmid, "Al Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 5, no. 1 (2014).
[3] Tony Blair was speaking at the 2015 launch of the Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, part of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. Blair's comments can be found at http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/news/entry/tony-blair-to-defeat-extremism-we-must-focus-on-the-religious-as-well-as-po/.

among what are termed 'vulnerable' groups and individuals will decrease, and fewer people will be radicalised into violent extremism or terrorism.

This theory – widely accepted by Western politicians, officials, and analysts in think-tanks and the media – is about a decade old, its first recorded articulation emerging from the development of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy, known as CONTEST. That strategy's architect, Sir David Omand, announced in 2005 that we "badly need a counter-narrative that will help groups exposed to the terrorist message make sense of what they are seeing around them".[4] Think-tanks and advocacy organisations in the UK and in the US picked up Sir David's challenge. In London, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the Quilliam Foundation have both invested heavily in countering the violent Islamist narrative, with the latter advising the Home Affairs Select Committee in the UK's Parliament:

> Narrative is central to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. In its simplest incarnation, the Islamist narrative is 'Islam is under attack and we must defend it'. In terrorism, it is used to promote violence, in extremism it is used to promote values that are antithetical to human rights norms, and in radicalisation it is used to exploit vulnerable people and recruit them to the cause. This narrative is sufficiently broad to apply to populations all over the world, to local and international conflicts, and to oppose domestic and foreign policies. It is sufficiently malleable to apply to group and personal grievances, both real and perceived.[5]

The Quilliam Foundation thus urged that the "Islamist narrative must be countered as a counter-extremism priority", even though this was, in fact, already British government policy. That policy had been set out in a series of speeches and statements by the former British prime minister David Cameron and his then Home Secretary, Theresa May, and was encapsulated in the British government's 2015 *Counter-Extremism Strategy*, which stated that "extreme Islamists draw on the supposed incompatibility between liberal democracy and their interpretation of the Muslim faith to promote the idea of a 'war on Islam' to create a 'them and us' narrative and stoke division".[6] These narratives were to be undermined by a broadly-based approach including legislation and the use of international aid, but the problem of extremism was conceived primarily as an ideological one. Trailing the strategy in a widely reported speech in Birmingham earlier that year, the British prime minister said: "The fact is from Woolwich to Tunisia, from Ottawa to Bali, these murderers all spout the same twisted narrative, one that claims to be based on a particular faith". He went on to reassure civil society: "If you're interested in reform; if you want to challenge the extremists in our midst; if you want to build an alternative narrative or if you just want to help protect your kids – we are with you and we will back you – with practical help, with funding, with campaigns, with protection and with political representation".[7]

[4] D. Omand, "Countering international terrorism: The use of strategy", *Survival* 47, no. 4 (2005), pp. 107-16.
[5] J. Russell and H. Rafiq, *Countering Islamist Extremist Narratives: A Strategic Briefing* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2016), p. 3. This report was, the authors make clear, largely written for submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into countering extremism in the UK.
[6] HM Government, *Counter-Extremism Strategy* (London: HMSO, October 2015).
[7] David Cameron, speech on extremism at Ninestiles School in Birmingham, 20 July 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech.

In the UK, then, counter-narrative theory is firmly entrenched in government policy, political activism and in public debate. The same is true in the United States. Addressing the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in 2015 – one of the most high-profile events in the field of what is known in the US and elsewhere as 'CVE' and, for the UN, preventing violent extremism (PVE) – President Obama denounced "the lie that we are somehow engaged in a clash of civilizations; that America and the West are somehow at war with Islam or seek to suppress Muslims; or that we are the cause of every ill in the Middle East". He went on: "That narrative becomes the foundation upon which terrorists build their ideology and by which they try to justify their violence". He vowed that "the United States will do more to help counter hateful ideologies, and today I urge your nations to join us in this urgent work".[8] One of Washington, DC's most influential think-tanks, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), issued a major report in November 2016 which featured, as its first recommendation, "Strengthening resistance to extremist ideologies", under which it proclaimed that "we must redouble efforts to enhance respect for religious diversity, stem the spread of intolerance, and reinforce community resilience to extremist narratives".[9]

The European Union too has embraced counter-narrative theory. In its Revised Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, approved by the Council of the European Union in 2014, the EU proposed (under the sub-heading "Support messages countering terrorism") to "support and amplify counter-narratives emanating from those with local influence", and to work with former terrorists and their families to "collate and promote their testimonies, as these are also powerful tools to counter the narratives and perceived ideals".[10] And counter-narrative also has its proponents outside the West. Hedayah, the international centre of excellence for CVE that is based in Abu Dhabi, launched an online counter-narrative library in October 2016.[11] And numerous national CVE strategies in regions threatened by violent movements identify counter-narrative as a priority.[12]

Counter-narrative theory has thus gained a remarkable degree of consensus among decision makers and opinion formers. However, the theory suffers from a serious problem: it is supported by very little evidence. The assumptions upon which it rests are sweeping and, on the whole, not grounded in research. This has been demonstrated by Kate Ferguson, whose literature review challenges three of the theory's main assumptions – that violent words lead to violent deeds, that counter-narratives can replace terrorist narratives, and that the actual threat of violent extremism can be mitigated through discourse.[13] Moreover, counter-narrative theory reflects a broader set of assumptions, particularly pronounced among governments, about the causal factors of extremist violence. In particular, some governments are wont to emphasise ideology, especially ideology deriving from overseas, as the

[8] "Remarks by the President at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism", 19 February 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/19/remarks-president-summit-countering-violent-extremism-february-19-2015.
[9] S.N. Green and K. Proctor, *Turning Point: A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2016), pp. iv-v.
[10] Council of the European Union, "EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment" (9956/14), 2014, pp. 8-9.
[11] http://www.hedayahcenter.org/activites/80/activities/511/2016/665/launch-of-the-counter-narrative-library.
[12] See, for example, the Federal Republic of Somalia's "National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism" (First Draft), 27 June 2016, http://www.radiomuqdisho.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CVE-Strategy-26-August-English.pdf.
[13] K. Ferguson, "Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence" (Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, 1 March 2016), http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf.

principal source for the corruption of the minds of those who turn to violence.[14] By leaving out other factors or explanations, from socio-economic grievances to the lure of adventure to the primary human need for survival, the ideological explanation is at best a gross over-simplification. This emphasis on ideology also assumes that indoctrination is the primary vehicle for what is generally termed radicalisation (itself a highly contested term) – which leaves out other, well-evidenced explanations for behavioural change such as identification with a group, socialisation, and the effect of civil conflicts.[15]

Counter-narrative theory also suffers from a significant degree of under-conceptualisation. No term in the field of terrorism studies is complete without a weighty baggage of definitional problems, and 'counter-narrative' is fraught with confusion and vagueness. This starts with the word narrative itself. In ordinary use, 'narrative' is broadly synonymous with 'story' (a narrated series of connected events) or 'storytelling' (the act of narration), but when applied to terrorism/violent extremism it is often used in a much broader sense, to mean (amongst other things) an explanation, or a belief, or a worldview.[16] At times, it appears to be almost interchangeable with 'ideology' in the sense of a systematic set of (usually political) beliefs: David Cameron's "twisted narrative", for instance, is clearly not a story in the conventional sense. But while the politicians tend to use it as a synonym for ideology, social scientists working in terrorism studies have used it to mean something quite different: Stephen R. Corman, for example, defines narrative as "a system of stories that share themes, forms, and archetypes".[17] (We will come back to this version of narrative later.) The definitional complexity of the term is not, of course, confined to the field of terrorism – even in literary criticism, as we shall see, there is no single, commonly accepted definition[18] – but the problem here is particularly stark when the term is used so promiscuously to mean different things. The looseness of our understanding of extremist narrative means that 'counter-narrative' can be anything from simple rebuttal – of the kind practised by the US State Department's Global Engagement Center, responsible for the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign, designed to stop young Americans from joining so-called Islamic State (IS) through tweeting – to programmes of strategic communication, such as those delivered by the Home Office's Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) in the UK.[19] At times, 'counter-narrative' seems barely more than a euphemism for state propaganda – communications designed to further

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[14] See, for example, the UK's "Counter-Extremism Strategy" (2015), with a preface by David Cameron confidently pronouncing that "We know that terrorism is really a symptom; ideology is the root cause" (p. 5). The strategy's core is a chapter (pp. 21-29) entitled "Countering Extremist Ideology".

[15] For the debate on the terminology of radicalisation, see M. Sedgwick, "The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010), pp. 479-494, and P.R. Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization", *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013), pp. 873-893. For causal factors in radicalisation and violent extremism/terrorism beyond ideology, see R. Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011), p. 7 and "Radicalization into violent extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011), p. 37.

[16] See, for example, David Kilcullen's definition, quoted in A.P. Schmid, "Al Qaeda's Single Narrative", p. 3.

[17] S.R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication", in L. Fenstermacher and T. Leventhal (eds.), *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies* (Washington, DC: NSI Inc., September 2011), p. 36.

[18] For a detailed exploration of the history of the concept of narrative, see M. Hyvärinen, M. Hatavara, and L-C Hydén, *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013).

[19] *Think Again, Turn Away* was launched in December 2013. It was widely criticised on effectiveness grounds, and has been discontinued. The Global Engagement Center's twitter account is at https://twitter.com/TheGEC. RICU was launched in 2007 as a cross-departmental strategic communication body based in the Home Office's Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism. Strategic communication ('stratcomms') is a term favoured by the military to denote planned and systematic information campaigns to shape perceptions and influence behaviour. For a British military view of the issue, see S.A. Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, December 2008.

a state's political objectives – a sense that is at least implicit in Omand's formative statement from 2005.

The problem with such loose language is not merely academic: it is a source of confusion which has practical, real-world effects. By failing to clearly describe and classify terrorist communication, the rhetoric associated with counter-narrative theory confuses us about how we might confront terrorism in the communication sphere. This is evident at the most fundamental level. We have seen that both Tony Blair and David Omand switch from "narrative" to "message" as if the two words were interchangeable. Similarly, ISD – the think-tank which has done more work on this topic than any other – has proposed a "counter-narrative spectrum" that contains three categories: "government strategic communications", "alternative narratives", and "counter-narratives". This taxonomy is welcome and provides much-needed clarity in differentiating between the tools that are available to governments and others. However, in setting out the rationale for counter-narratives, the report's authors immediately switch to different language: counter-narratives exist to "deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging".[20] But, however we define the terms, a narrative is not a message: a narrative may contain statements, instructions or items of information (messages), and a message may be artfully constructed into narrative form, but there is simple confusion here between form and content. That confusion is debilitating. It prevents us from understanding what the terrorists are saying and how they are saying it. It has led to an obsession with online 'counter-messaging' – which assumes that terrorist text is pure communication, or content without form – and an almost complete neglect of how terrorists use narrative, and why they might do so.[21] It is little wonder that counter-narrative techniques, which once appeared to offer so much to practitioners, are now coming under increasingly sceptical scrutiny.

3. Losing the Plot: The Absence of Narrative Studies from Studies of Terrorist Narrative

Narrative has been studied for over two thousand years. Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), the first surviving text of literary studies, has a lot to say about narrative. It was Aristotle who first distinguished two of the fundamental elements of narrative – ordering events into a sequence (what he called '*mythos*'), and using characters to experience the events and to provide a commentary on them (what he called '*ethos*').[22] Over the centuries Aristotle's insights have been amplified and refined by a succession of theorists but it was not until the early twentieth century that narrative came under sustained empirical and theoretical analysis with the emergence in Russia of a literary approach called formalism. As its name implies, formalism focuses on the formal properties of a text, rather than its social or political content. The Russian formalists developed significant concepts for our understanding of how narrative works, including an important

[20] R. Briggs and S. Feve, "Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What Are the Implications for Government?", Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013.
[21] See for example "ICSR Insight – The Power of the Swarm: Where Next for Counter-Messaging?" (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2016), http://icsr.info/2016/07/icsr-insight-power-swarm-next-counter-messaging/.
[22] Aristotle, *Poetics,* tr. A. Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

distinction between the sequence of events in a narrative as they occurred chronologically, and how those events are presented to the reader/listener.[23] In the second half of the century, structuralism began to dominate literary theory – spawning an approach that drew on linguistics to analyse narrative as a structure analogous to a language, with rules, conventions and patterns. Later in the twentieth century, formalist and structuralist approaches to narrative began to be codified in the sub-discipline of narratology, which has developed a set of precise terms and concepts to understand narrative structures both thematically and technically.[24] Thanks to narratologists like Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, we can now distinguish between different types of narrator, describe in detail how perspective or point of view works, and define quite precisely how narratives can manipulate time in many complex and subtle ways. Such approaches are by no means universally approved: they have been criticised as mechanistic, for ignoring the social and political function of a text, and for cutting the text off from its context. For this reason, some literary scholars prefer to use the tools of narratology along with others which address a text's social and political meaning and context – in other words, they examine both form and content, as well as the relationship between the two.[25]

Given the wealth of scholarship on narrative, and the importance placed on countering terrorists' narratives in the field of CVE, we might expect that these scholarly resources are being deployed to help us understand the methods and effects of terrorist propaganda,[26] and to provide a theoretical basis for counter-narrative interventions. However, scholarship on narrative from a literary or literary-theoretical perspective is by and large conspicuous by its absence from the literature on terrorist propaganda, including that which claims to examine its narrative properties. For example, Kurt Braddock's study of narratives used by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) provides an excellent analysis of what this particular group communicates, but although he cites Genette and the French structuralist Roland Barthes in his definition of narrative, his method is derived purely from psychology and communication science. By coding the thematic content of the group's propaganda, he is able to provide an impressive and useful breakdown of its ideological content, showing for example that ALF propaganda emphasises the mental capacity of animals (present in 60% of items in his sample), the victimisation of animals by humans (54%), and animal kindheartedness (51%).[27] But this approach is highly reductive: by mining narratives for their themes and messages, little attention is paid to how those themes and messages are presented. This approach is also rather narrow: in discussing the effect of terrorist propaganda on audiences and readers, his psychology/communication science method causes him to focus predominantly on whether ALF propaganda has the capacity to change minds. This, and his later more theoretical study in collaboration with John Horgan, thus judge

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[23] For some of the foundational texts of Russian formalism, see L. T. Lemon & M. J. Reis (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

[24] For structuralist and narratological approaches, see, for example, G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); J. Culler, "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative", *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* 169 (1981), pp. 169-187.

[25] See, for example, D. Darby, "Form and Content: An Essay in the History of Narratology", *Poetics Today* 22, no. 1 (2001), pp. 829-852.

[26] 'Propaganda' is, needless to say, another highly contentious term. I understand it here as any text or speech that seeks to influence an audience for the benefit of a particular group. For a useful discussion, see J. Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda: The Red Army Faction and the Provisional IRA, 1968–86* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), pp. 73-101.

[27] K. Braddock, "The utility of narratives for promoting radicalization: The case of the Animal Liberation Front", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 2014, p. 9.

narrative on a single dimension. Immediate, direct persuasion may be an important effect of narrative but is not, as it were, the whole story.[28]

One group of scholars based at the Center of Strategic Communication (CSC) in Arizona State University does deserve special attention for bringing at least one strand of narrative studies to the analysis of terrorist storytelling. The most elaborate of the CSC's publications is Jeffry R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman's *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (2011)[29], which attempts to examine terrorist narrative as a literary form as well as an ideological communication. Their book seeks to document and classify what they call "master narratives" or "systems of stories" that animate jihadist propaganda. Their method derives from the social theories of Max Weber and the anthropological and Jungian theories of Joseph Campbell, whose most famous work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), identified a single recurring story – what Campbell called a "monomyth" – that is repeated across cultures with endless variations, featuring identifiable and recurring characters, situations and plots. [30] Halverson, Goodall and Corman identify not one but twelve recurring "systems of stories" – which may more accurately be labelled as 'cultural myths' – in Islamist propaganda, many of which have sources in the Qur'an and Hadith, such as the story of Pharaoh (the archetype of the tyrant whose rule has attempted to supplant God's law), or from early Islamic history, such as the Battle of Badr (the archetypical battle in which the Muslim few vanquish the non-Muslim many). Their approach has many positives. First, they situate their analysis in a broad approach that sees storytelling not merely as a branch of the entertainment industry but as a fundamental – perhaps the most fundamental – human activity. They cite with approval the philosopher Walter Fisher, whose theory of the "narrative paradigm" proposes that narratives are patterns, constructed by the species he labels "homo narrans", in order to make sense of a complex and confusing world. [31] Second, they rightly identify a rich tradition of storytelling in religious discourse as a hugely significant resource for modern-day Islamist extremist entrepreneurs and ideologues: stories not only help us make sense of things, they also guide us and help to set our expectations. Third, although their approach can be criticised as being reductive by its nature, they avoid the over-simplification of Campbell's single, universal story and propose instead the more nuanced claim that some master-narratives resonate more strongly in some cultures than others.

This and other studies from the CSC are important contributions. Nonetheless, I propose that their approach is insufficient. Although they start from a very different point of origin from Braddock and Horgan, their approach is underpinned by a similar assumption – that a story is a rhetorical exercise, a method of persuasion. Their analysis is one-dimensional, limited to an identification of recurring motifs and themes without attending to the texture or technique of terrorist narrative. They therefore miss the affective and aesthetic dimensions of narrative that are fundamental to its appeal, as well as the complexity and ambiguity that may be an inevitable consequence of choosing narrative over other forms of discourse: the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin proposed that the novel is inescapably "dialogic" or multi-voiced, meaning that

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[28] K. Braddock and J. Horgan, "Towards a guide for constructing and disseminating counter-narratives to reduce support for terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 2015, pp. 4-7.

[29] J.R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and S.R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[30] J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, third edition (Novato CA: New World Library, 2012). Campbell's work is now most famous for inspiring George Lucas's *Star Wars* film franchise, as well as the film *The Lion King*.

[31] W.R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

it contains multiple points of view by virtue of its use of multiple characters, and it is not too much of a stretch to contend that this is a characteristic of stories in general, not just novels.[32]

The objection may be raised that literary tools and theories are all very well for literary artefacts such as novels, but have no place in addressing real-world problems of terrorism and extremism. Terrorists after all are not in the business of entertaining, so why treat their communications as deserving of the sort of analysis that would normally be applied to Dickens or Dostoevsky? There are, though, good reasons to examine terrorist propaganda seriously as a form of literary production. First, terrorists of numerous persuasions are influenced by the literature they read. Whether it is Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Breivik discovering ideological succour in Ayn Rand's novels of radical libertarianism, or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's PhD thesis on a commentary on a twelfth-century poem, terrorists are often consumers of literature and in some cases we can be very confident that their reading shapes their actions and their communications.[33]

The clearest and most shocking example of such influence is the extraordinary effect of the novel *The Turner Diaries* (1978), written by a white supremacist physics professor, William Luther Pierce (1933-2002), and published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald. As J.M. Berger has recently demonstrated, this dystopian novel, clearly indebted to a tradition of counter-factual political novels including Jack London's minor classic *The Iron Heel* (1907), has been implicated in 200 murders, including the mass murder of 168 civilians perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City in 1995.[34] The novel is both highly ideological in its nightmare vision of an autocratic American government extinguishing the civil rights of citizens before it meets it match in a militia-based insurgency, and practical, containing instructions which McVeigh appeared to follow in making his improvised explosive device. Clippings from the novel were recovered from McVeigh's car when he was arrested shortly after the explosion in Oklahoma City, including one with the following lines highlighted: "But the real value of all of our attacks today lies in the psychological impact, not in the immediate casualties".[35]

McVeigh's British equivalent was David Copeland, who carried out three attacks in London in 1999, including one which killed three and injured 140 in the Admiral Duncan public house. Copeland told police after his arrest:

> If you've read *The Turner Diaries*, you know the year 2000 there'll be the uprising and all that, racial violence on the streets. My aim was political. It was to cause a racial war in this country. There'd be a backlash from the ethnic minorities, then all the white people will go out and vote BNP.[36]

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[32] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist), Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981.
[33] For Breivik's interest in Rand, see his manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* (2011), written under the pseudonym of Andrew Berwick, pp. 373, 585, 1407 (available at https://fas.org/programs/tap/_docs/2083_-_A_European_Declaration_of_Independence.pdf). For Baghdadi's PhD thesis, see W. McCants, *The Isis Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Picador, 2015), p. 76n.
[34] See J.M. Berger, "The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism's Deadly Bible", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 8 (2016).
[35] Ibid., p. 15.
[36] *Panorama*, BBC, 30 June 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript_30_06_00.txt.

Copeland's choice of words ("you know [...] there'll be") is striking: the novel is a source not of entertainment, or even inspiration, but of knowledge. Copeland appears to have been so profoundly impressed by the novel that he was certain of its status as truth. But there is another aspect to the Copeland case that is important here. He was not the first to take the novel as a source of truth, and the example of others – McVeigh in particular, we must assume – reminds us that literature does not exist in a vacuum. It is consumed – or, to use a term from literary scholarship, *received* – and its reception by one individual or community shapes the way it is received by others. Thus a book can at one extreme be received as holy writ, and at another can end up going no further than the author's computer or a remaindered bookshop, and what determines the outcome is how it is received. Furthermore, literary works that have been received widely or influentially have a tendency to shape other works: that is how literary genres form. We should pay attention, therefore, not simply to individual works like *The Turner Diaries* but to the cultures which they help to shape: that is why persuasion is too narrow a focus when examining the effect of terrorist narrative, because it assumes a simple, direct and linear effect on the reader.

Fortunately, the broader cultural dimension of violent extremism is now beginning to receive the attention it deserves. The Norwegian terrorism scholar Thomas Hegghammer, for instance, has begun to address what Islamist terrorists do when they are not waging *jihad*:

> Look inside any militant group – or conventional army for that matter – and you will see lots of artistic products and social practices that serve no obvious military purpose. Think of the cadence calls of the U.S. Marines, the songs of leftist revolutionaries, or the tattoos of neo-nazis. Look inside jihadi groups and you'll see bearded men with kalashnikovs reciting poetry, discussing dreams, and weeping on a regular basis.[37]

It may be rare for a single literary work like *The Turner Diaries* to initiate action. But actions and certainly worldviews are shaped by culture, in the narrow sense of intellectual and artistic achievements, and I would argue literary culture in particular. This has now begun to be recognised with important recent scholarship on the poetry produced by Islamist militants, such as Elisabeth Kendall's research on jihadist verse in Yemen, Alex Strick van Linchoten and Felix Kuehn's collection of Taliban *ghazals*, and Robyn Cresswell and Bernard Haykel's article on IS's poet who uses the name Ahlam al-Nasr.[38] Cresswell and Haykel make a claim similar to Hegghammer's about the importance of literary texts produced by jihadists: "Analysts have generally ignored these texts, as if poetry were a colorful but ultimately distracting by-product of jihad. But this is a mistake. It is impossible to understand jihadism—its objectives, its appeal for new recruits, and its durability—without examining its culture".[39]

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[37] T. Hegghammer, "Why Terrorists Weep: The Socio-Cultural Practices of Jihadi Militants", Paul Wilkinson Memorial Lecture, University of St. Andrews, 16 April 2015, http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_Wilkinson_Memorial_Lecture.pdf.

[38] E. Kendall, "Yemen's al-Qa'ida and Poetry as a Weapon of Jihad" in E. Kendall and E. Stein (eds.), *Twenty-first Century Jihad: Law, Society and Military Action* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 247-69; A. Strick van Linchoten and F. Kuehn (eds.), *Poetry of the Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2012); R. Cresswell and B. Haykel, "Battle Lines", *The New Yorker* 8 and 15 June 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/08/battle-lines-jihad-creswell-and-haykel.

[39] R. Cresswell and B. Haykel, "Battle Lines", *The New Yorker* 8 and 15 June 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/08/battle-lines-jihad-creswell-and-haykel.

Terrorists, then, are producers as well as consumers of literature. And just as some militants are also poets, some are also novelists and playwrights. Indeed, one of the most influential figures in the intellectual development of contemporary jihadism was the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), who wrote several novels and works of literary criticism, albeit before he turned to radical religious politics.[40] Others turned to literature as an alternative to violence, such as the Irish playwright and novelist Brendan Behan (1923-1964), an IRA member in the 1930s-1940s who attempted to bomb the Liverpool docks and murder two Irish detectives, and whose later autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy* (1958) confronts his own past as a militant Irish republican.[41]

But some have used literature alongside support for violence, such as the Palestinian novelist and playwright Ghassan Kanafani (1936-72), author of the classic novella *Men in the Sun* (*Rijal fi-a-shams*, 1962), who was a leading member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), assassinated in Beirut in an explosion believed to have been planned by Israel in retaliation for the PFLP's role in the Lod airport massacre in 1972.[42] These are storytellers in the specific sense of being published, recognised authors – but terrorist propaganda is produced not just by those whose literary skills have received formal recognition. Storytelling, as counter-narrative theory acknowledges but does not properly examine, is fundamental to how terrorists communicate. And literary-critical approaches have the potential to reveal how they do so.

4. The Crocodile and the Towers: A Literary-Critical Approach to Terrorist Propaganda

In searching for examples of storytelling in terrorist propaganda, the problem is abundance, not scarcity. Even if we confine our search to violent Islamism, the choice is wide. One of the most infamous and successful jihadist ideologues, the Yemeni-US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011), produced dozens of audio recordings of his sermons and lectures, many of which are explicitly in narrative form, with titles such as 'Stories from Hadith', 'The Story of the Bull', and 'The Story of Salamah Ibn al-Aqwa'.[43] Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the jihadist franchise of which al-Awlaki was formerly spiritual leader, produces an online English-language magazine, *Inspire*, which regularly features articles in narrative form. The Autumn 2016 edition, for example, has the familiar story of the 11 September 2001 attacks – but told as a memoir by an al Qaeda veteran in Afghanistan, 'Sheikh Khubeib As-Sudani', who reminisces about the organisation's leaders as they prepared the operation and heard the news of its success.[44] Similarly, IS's English-language magazine *Dabiq* is full of stories, from biographies of its *mujahidin* to tales from the Qur'an or Hadith retold to explain or justify the group's actions.[45]

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[40] See J. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (London: Hurst, 2010).
[41] See M. O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Roberts Rinehart, 2000).
[42] See M. Rabbani, "Ghassan Kanafani", in P. Mattar (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians* (Infobase, 2005), pp. 275–276.
[43] A repository of al-Awlaki's audio recordings can be found at http://www.kalamullah.com/anwar-alawlaki.html.
[44] Sheikh Khubeib As-Sudani, "A Thousand Times Greater than USS-Cole", *Inspire* 16, Autumn 2016, pp. 16-21.
[45] See for example two articles in *Dabiq* 15 (published in July 2016): "The Response to the Call of the Prophet" (pp. 14-19), an account of Islam's early interactions with Christian power, and Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah, "How I Came to Islam" (pp. 36-39), the story of a Western woman converting to Islam and emigrating to IS-held territory. The articles are linked thematically in an issue which focuses on the power relationships between Islam and Christianity, asserting the moral superiority of Islam and its perfect expression in IS's model of governance.

To demonstrate how literary-critical techniques can be productive in researching terrorist propaganda, I have selected what I consider to be a representative and influential example, Osama bin Laden's 'Message to the American People', released to the Al-Jazeera television station on 29 October 2004, shortly before that year's presidential election in the US. It is a video statement in which bin Laden speaks for just under fifteen minutes in order to explain why he ordered the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks. In the statement he embeds a story, and he signals his adoption of a narrative form quite explicitly: "I shall talk to you about the story behind those events and shall tell you truthfully about the moments in which the decision was taken, for you to consider".[46] Bin Laden claims that "it had never occurred to us to strike the towers" until "we witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American/Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon". He then describes the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as the pivotal moment in his life: the American support for what he presents as a primal crime turned his heart against the United States: "I couldn't forget those moving scenes, blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents, rockets raining down on our home without mercy". He then introduces a striking simile: "The situation was like a crocodile meeting a helpless child, powerless except for his screams. Does the crocodile understand a conversation that doesn't include a weapon? And the whole world saw and heard but it didn't respond". Throughout, bin Laden brings the focus back to his own psyche, linking his personal torment to geopolitics:

> In those difficult moments many hard-to-describe moments bubbled in my soul, but in the end they produced an intense feeling of rejection of tyranny, and gave birth to a strong resolve to punish the oppressors. And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind and that we should destroy towers in America in order that they taste some of what we tasted and so that they be deterred from killing our women and children. And that day, it was confirmed to me that oppression and the intentional killing of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy. Destruction is freedom and democracy, while resistance is terrorism and intolerance.

In the hands of Halverson, Goodall and Corman, this would simply be another version of the "master-narrative" of "The Infidel Invader", which resonates because of its historical association with the Crusades as well as more recent disasters befalling the Islamic world.[47] In order to show that there is more to this narrative than its thematic content, I shall draw on an influential structuralist approach to narrative analysis set out by Mieke Bal in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985). Bal proposes that any narrative – which, in literary criticism, is usually understood simply as any sequence of events that is narrated by an agent or subject to an audience – has three layers: the fable, the story, and the text. The fable is "a series of logically and

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chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by the actors".[48] The story is how those events are presented to the reader. The text is the verbal presentation of the story. Each of these levels comprise several elements. The fable includes four elements – events, actors, time, and location. The story comprises six: perspective or focalization, sequential ordering, rhythm (speed of presentation), frequency (of events), characterization, and space. The text layer includes the narrator, description, and levels of narration (whether directly observed, reported, embedded and so on). Although Bal does not mention these, we might add other elements that make up the verbal texture of the narrative to the textual layer, such as rhetorical devices, figures of speech, and register.

Bal thus provides a set of tools for description and analysis. Applying them to bin Laden's story, and taking the three layers in turn, we can describe two distinct fables. One is geopolitical, in which the United States and Israel form a strategic alliance, the Israelis invade Lebanon with American support in 1982, and the country and in particular its Muslim population undergoes devastating military aggression. The second fable is a personal one, in which Osama bin Laden is the primary character. He witnesses the invasion of Lebanon – he suggests that he was in the country, although there appears to be little evidence that this was the case – becomes distressed by what he sees, experiences an inner turmoil, and resolves to take revenge on the perpetrators. We can see the elements of the fables quite clearly: we have events (the invasion and bombardment, the deaths of civilians, 9/11), actors (the US and Israel, the victims, onlookers in other nations, and bin Laden himself – transported to the heart of the action), time (from 1982 to the present, but with a temporal bridge linking 1982 to 2001), and location (Lebanon and New York, but also the inner location of bin Laden's troubled soul).

The story level follows very closely the personal fable of bin Laden's experience of events. The focus is on him throughout – this is a personal story of political and emotional awakening, of one man coming to terms with the injustice of the geopolitical system that condemned innocent victims to terrible suffering in order for the US to maintain its global hegemony. In Bal's narratological terms, the story is focalised through bin Laden – he is an internal (or, to use the jargon, *intradiegetic*) narrator. The story is thus in every sense about bin Laden: what is important is not so much what happened but what happened to him, and how he responded. With such a short extract, it is not possible to do justice to all of the elements at the story level but we can see how the victims and perpetrators are characterised: the victims are helpless, the oppressors are distant and impersonal, and bin Laden is at the same time distraught witness, avenging hero, and (implicitly at least) a victim as he repeatedly identifies with the victims by using the pronouns "us" and "our". The events are ordered to make psychological sense – the bombardment causes death and destruction, which in turn causes a profound change in the worldview of the narrator. Most interestingly, bin Laden artfully manipulates the sequential ordering and temporal rhythm to make 1982 and 2001 appear closer than they are. He claims that it was events in Lebanon that convinced him to attack New York, which is belied by everything we know about his biography and the development of his extremist thinking. But in bin Laden's story, the nineteen intervening years pass in the twinkling of an eye. And by identifying himself as both subject and object of the story, bin Laden is eliciting sympathy not only for the victims in Lebanon but also for himself. Although addressed to the American people,

[48] M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 5.

we might therefore begin to wonder whether the audience here is not so much the Western as the Islamic world.

Techniques for eliciting sympathy are even more evident at the textual level. Bin Laden's vivid description of grotesquely damaged human flesh forces us to visualise the US/Israeli operation from the perspective of its victims. He describes his mental turmoil in strikingly metaphorical terms – ideas "bubble" in his soul, but then he "gives birth" to a resolution that comes to fruition nearly two decades later. And then, even more powerfully, he crystallises the relationship between victim and oppressor with the metaphor of a crocodile and its helpless human prey. The metaphor works not only as a means to elicit sympathy, but also to justify the actions of that child's protector: the crocodile does not understand a conversation without a weapon. Bin Laden implies that his mission is to kill the crocodile before it can savage any more helpless children.

Bin Laden's facility with the textual layer does not end with his figures of speech. He chooses the same word, "towers", to denote the targets of both the 1982 invasion and the 2001 attacks. Just as the rhythm of the story layer connects the two events, so do the lexical choices of the verbal layer. The story and text layers thus work elegantly together to support the principal message of the story, that "for every action there is a reaction". But this is a story and not just a message: the moral of the statement may be reducible to a short statement, but it is formed affectively as well as rationally; it is designed to affect our emotions, even if that is not immediately apparent. Bin Laden's narrative is clearly a misrepresentation of the facts, but that is not the point: he has shaped the narrative so that it seems true because it purports to reveal both the psyche of the author and the hidden truth behind actual events. This is important to understanding the power of terrorist narrative: by satisfying an internal logic while remaining apparently true to the real world – the qualities that Walter Fisher calls "coherence" and "fidelity", and which he says determine whether a narrative will be accepted[49] – narratives can appear to be more profoundly true than other, more overtly factual forms. As the narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott puts it, "our need for narrative is so strong that we don't really believe something is true unless we can see it as a story. Bringing a collection of events into narrative coherence can be described as a way of normalizing those events. It renders them plausible, allowing one to see how they all 'belong'".[50]

Literary-critical approaches, whether or not they are narratological like Bal's, have the potential to take us beyond the limitations of political-science analysis of terrorist propaganda as simple carriers of ideological content, or the communications studies or psychological approaches that emphasise rhetoric and hence persuasion. By seeing terrorist propaganda as aesthetic texts, we can understand that they may work in ways other than by ideological indoctrination, or simple persuasion. This is important for three reasons. First, it shows that terrorist creativity is a source of appeal in its own right. Authors like bin Laden and al-Awlaki, and William Luther Pierce, draw followers not solely through personal charisma, or malign persuasion, or even by fitting their narratives to the lived experience of their followers – important though all that is. They also inspire – it is not for nothing that this particular verb is the title of AQAP's magazine – and inspiration is as much the province of imaginative literature as it is of theology or politics.

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[49] W.R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration* (1987).

[50] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 44.

Second, appreciating the aesthetic dimension of terrorist propaganda makes clearer its contribution to terrorist culture (in the broad sense of customs and behaviour, as well as the narrow sense of artistic and intellectual endeavour): the cultural resources available to a violent movement are as necessary to sustain and direct a movement as material resources such as finance and weaponry. Culture shapes ideology, and in looking for explanations for terrorist behaviour, we should (as Hegghammer and others insist) pay attention to cultural heritage. This should be apparent even from a narrow study of terrorist statements: themes repeat themselves, but so do figures of speech and even particular verbal phrases.[51] In other words, we can see the emergence of genres of terrorist production, in for example a discernible tradition of extremist Islamist narrative from bin Laden to al-Awlaki to *Dabiq*.

The third reason is perhaps the most important. Returning to the vexed theory of counter-narrative, I suggest that an appreciation of the literary form and function of terrorist propaganda might give us pause for thought before we invest scarce resources in activities that may at best be futile and at worst counter-productive. If the appeal of a text is more complex and more subtle than the messages it contains, then it follows that we cannot simply combat it through a more accurate rebuttal. That is not to say that counter-narrative is a lost cause: the centrality of narrative to terrorists and terrorism suggests that there may be considerable potential here. But if counter-narrative is to rise to the challenge, it means using the aesthetic and affective resources of storytelling, and not just making appeals to reason or to self-interest.

While it may sound heretical to talk of appreciating, rather than condemning, terrorist propaganda, we do ourselves no favours by failing or refusing to understand its appeal, or reducing terrorists' discourse to a simplistic series of messages. It is no accident that terrorist ideologues and entrepreneurs such as bin Laden or an al-Awlaki possessed creative, literary skills in such abundance: their influence has in part been derived from their achievements as authors or storytellers. And if we accept this point, then narrow responses – those that are focused on ideology, rely on strategies of rebuttal, and seek only to persuade – are unlikely to be effective. Policy-makers and practitioners need to look beyond their tools of strategic communication, public diplomacy and social media campaigning, and rediscover the potential of cultural production – including literature – in offering an alternative to the seductive creativity of violent groups.

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[51] For an analytical and conceptual framework for the recurrence of themes in terrorist propaganda, see D. Holbrook, G. Ramsay and M. Taylor, "'Terroristic Content': Towards a Grading Scale", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (2013), pp. 202-223.

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Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism

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