

## The Uncanny Suburbs *Arlington Road* and the Politics of Terrorism

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*The reader does not, in other words, 'find' a national identity through imagining a simultaneity of thousands (or millions) of others who are reading the same text at the same time. Instead, a national identity is constituted by discovering a set of concerns he or she 'recognizes' as his or her own within a text or texts (Bowman 1994:141).*

If, as Glenn Bowman suggests, the nation is imagined through processes of textual identification and recognition, then particular psychic mechanisms of nationalism might be read in a nation's popular culture. Where Bowman suggests that a national identity is constituted by a spectator when she or he recognizes her own concerns in a text, I would add that the nation is also imagined when concerns or beliefs that are definitively *not* one's own are recognized. The nation, then, is constituted both "with" and "against," or perhaps in a space between these poles.

The nation can only exist in a constant and confused tension with its enemies—those mysterious and sinister figures who (ostensibly) stand "outside" or "beyond" the fatherland and the Rule of Law. Violent, irrational, and "uncivilized," these enemies of the state seem to stand for everything that the state does not. As a subject, the state (and those who identify with it) necessarily defines itself by its other, its perverse enemies. For Aletta Norval, "all identity is constituted through an externalization of the other via the drawing of political frontiers," but this seems particularly true of the modern nation-state (1994:120). In late 20th century US politics, one tropic figure has dominated representations of the state's "other"—the "terrorist."

For those of us raised in the 1970s and 1980s, the word "ter-

rorist” immediately conjures up a disappointingly familiar image—a bearded Arab man, eyes crazed with religious zeal. Countless media texts, in both film and television, established the terrorist as Arab (and the Arab as terrorist). Reviewing a host of made-for-TV movies about terrorism, Jack Shaheen notes that:

Whether the product is *Hostage Flight* (NBC, 1985), *Sword of Gideon* (HBO, 1986), *Under Siege* (NBC, 1986), *The Taking of Flight 847* (NBC, 1988), or *Terrorist on Trial: The United States vs. Salim Ajami* (CBS, 1988), the results are similar. Arabs are depicted in the images of Hitler’s SS and Attila’s hordes. The Arab lurks in the shadows with Ak-47, bomb, or dagger in order to seduce, beat, rape, and murder innocents (1989: 10).

The terrorist of the 1980s, then, was nearly always represented as a non-white, often Arab, “other” (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, Sharpe 2000). White terrorists were wholly absent in Reagan-era television, and American terrorists were typically non-white “foreigners.” Discussing *Under Siege*, a particularly racist manifestation of terrorist discourse, Shaheen explains that the terrorists’ allies in the US are typically Arab-Americans (in this case, in Dearborn, MI, where a substantial Arab-American population actually exists) (Shaheen 1989:10). Crucially, the hardships suffered by this community, as well as Arab victims of violence abroad, are omitted. Eschewing narrative complexity for simple demonization, terrorist films of the 1980s elide an Arab (“terrorist”) voice. Elaborating on this omission, Shaheen notes that:

Viewers see Arabs only as perpetrators of violence, never as victims, especially not of the kind of state terrorism on the West Bank. There are no images of Arab arms being broken, Arab homes being blown up, Arab demonstrators shot dead. Nor are there many apolitical images (1989:11).

Critically, then, the terrorist of the 1980s is both hypervisible (identifiable by skin color) and voiceless, a terrifying ethnic other that necessitates (and justifies) increased surveillance of American borders.

In the aftermath of the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing,

however, the rise of right-wing nativist militia politics has allowed for the creation of a new space in the national imaginary of terrorism. The self-styled “patriot” movement has become both a rhetorical and a material force. Concerned about processes of globalization and the loss of US sovereignty to the United Nations, militias often see the state as traitorous and corrupted. Tanya Telfair Sharpe explains that:

The principles of Identity Christianity [strongly connected to the militia movement, for Sharpe] provide the divine justification for acts of violence against the government, non-Whites, homosexuals, and Jews. To the Identity Christians, the government is bogus and must be dismantled (2000:619).

An apocalyptic Christianity of the type Sharpe describes heavily influences a number of the white men that make up the movement. Interpreting the Book of Daniel and Revelations as prophetic, militia members often see Armageddon as on the horizon, and arm themselves to prepare for imminent battles with demonic forces (Sharpe 2000).

The public imagination of this “new” militia terrorist is both similar to and different from terrorist representations of the 1970s and 1980s. While both are represented as pathologically religious, militias take Christianity, rather than Islam, “to extremes.” While the 1980s tirelessly rehashed “Islamic fundamentalist” hatred for the US and its citizens, militias are quite clearly concerned about the state specifically. Eschewing the destruction of the US, nativist terrorism rather seeks to force a return to an imagined earlier, “purer” moment in US political history. Both similar (religious, violent) to and different (white, US nationalist) from terrorists of the past and their media representations, militia terrorists both recapitulate and reconfigure discourses of terrorism in the United States. In this essay, I’m particularly interested in exploring the unconscious structures at play in this new articulation of “the terrorist.”

I hope to explore the evolution in the history of terrorist discourse by reading the 1998 Columbia Tristar Pictures release, *Arlington Road*. Fictionalizing the Oklahoma City bombing (in St. Louis, in the film) and raising the specter of another bombing, the film was one of the first to actively engage the complex semiotic territory of militia politics. While the film is not necessarily a momentous artistic achievement, lapsing into cliché more than occasionally, it functions as a cul-

tural text in and through which changes in political imaginaries of terrorism and hence, of the nation, might be read. Specifically, it interrogates the notion of the white man as terrorist and examines the extent that fear of terrorism pervades daily or intimate spaces.

If the nation defines itself by its other, then, an interrogation of representations of the terrorist in popular culture can be a useful political task because it helps identify some of the unconscious psychic mechanisms of politics. Particularly, it illuminates how cultural texts can configure and constitute the “real” of institutional and cultural politics. In other words, texts can shape the contours and grooves of political thinking, defining the boundaries of “what is politically thinkable” (Taylor 1997:76). Shaheen, for example, notes that hate crimes against Arab-Americans rose substantially during the 1980s, and communities specifically represented in media suffered a dramatic increase in political violence (1989:10). While texts discursively structure the real, then, so too the workings of the social might be read in texts. Building on Benedict Anderson’s “deterritorialization” of the nation, Bowman notes that:

Through identification with the positions set out in . . . discourse, the reader is carried out of the isolation of individual experience into a collective phenomenon which the discourse articulates in national terms. This re-evaluation of Anderson’s theorization of the process of imagining community not only shifts attention from commodity form (that of the novel or newspaper) to the narrative content enveloped within those forms, but also emphasizes the relationship between texts and audience through which the text plays a role in fixing the identity of its reader (1994:141).

Bowman usefully describes two courses of textual analysis. Initially, he explains how narrative content might be analyzed to reveal particular discourses of imagined nationalism. Textual narratives and aesthetics might be seen both as allegorical, exposing psychic structures of pleasure and fear, and as constructive, interpellating a position (or, more appropriately, multiple positions) of spectatorial identification or disidentification. This act of interpellation, then, constitutes Bowman’s second arena of textual analysis—interrogation of the relationship between texts and their spectators. This path opens up readings of how texts might help secure or manufacture consent to the domi-

nant order. In the case of terrorism, for example, terrorist narratives can create a palpable fear of an ethnic or political “other” that must be defended against with increased military spending and limitations on civil rights (Zulaika and Douglass 1996).

In this essay, then, I extend the structure that Bowman proposes, closely reading *Arlington Road* both in terms of its narrative structures and its potential spectatorial positioning. Specifically, I use Freudian and Lacanian theories of the spectator and the unconscious to postulate the complex and contradictory ways the film might position a viewer. After a brief discussion of Althusserian notions of cinematic reception, I analyze the text of *Arlington Road*, concentrating on uncanny representations of the terrorist and the psychic mechanisms of desire at play in the main character’s quest to unmask the terrorists. Using psychoanalytic methods to read the narrative and its imagery, I argue, exposes the multiple levels on which statist power operates. Implicit in this analysis, then, is a consideration of how the representation of terrorists in *Arlington Road* might simultaneously secure and destabilize the spectator’s consent to the status quo.

## Cinema, Nation, and Spectator

In his seminal *Lenin and Philosophy*, Louis Althusser builds on traditional Marxist notions of ideology as the superstructural distortion of an economic base by arguing that ideology “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” and that it is “relatively autonomous” (1971:162). Critically, then, Althusser departs from a notion of ideology as merely “false consciousness” and encourages specific analysis of the way that institutions (or apparatuses, in Althusser’s terms) function to obscure power differentials in social relations. In part, this is through cultural texts, which interpellate their readers in particular ways.

Interpellation, for Althusser, refers to the specific way that particular ideological structures, discourses, or texts address their reader, implicitly or explicitly. Althusser gives the example of a police officer calling “Hey, you there!” to someone in the street:

... the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail

was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed’ (and not someone else) (1971:174).

The example is perhaps a bit disingenuous, since it implies that the “hailed” individual did not already think of himself as a subject before being hailed. He did, of course, but only because he had already been interpellated and is constantly being interpellated as a subject. For Althusser, ideological texts function by creating, or hailing, subjects who then believe they are “freely submitting” to the dominant order (1971:182). Powerful ideologies do not always simply reproduce themselves in texts, however. Texts might convey both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic sentiments, and individual interpretations of texts clearly have radically different political valences. All texts are both the stake and the site of struggle, a space in which there is both domination and resistance (Althusser 1971:147, see also Kellner 1995:2).

In film theory, Althusser’s notion of “interpellation” has been extremely useful. Though the “subject” is usually called a “spectator,” film theory often argues, along Althusserian lines, that a film’s narrative structure and cinematography can structure a particular spectatorial position or positions. A viewer of the film is encouraged to identify with a particular character, be sexually attracted to another character, dislike another, and so on. In addition, elements of the narrative encourage us to feel outrage at a particular injustice, sympathy for unfortunate characters, and the like. In this fashion, a viewer’s identity as a “subject” can be created while watching a film. There is, however, a space of slippage—a possibility that the mechanisms of interpellation will not work on a particular spectator. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler insists that “this performative effort of naming can only attempt to bring its addressee into being: there is always the risk of a certain misrecognition” (1997:95). As such, any textual analysis produces a reading of narrative and potential processes of identification, not definitive truths about the way spectators receive particular texts.

### **Arlington Road, or the Road to Arlington (Cemetery)**

The film opens on Michael Faraday (Jeff Bridges), a professor of American History, driving to his suburban home. Nearly running

into a young boy with a terribly charred hand, Faraday rushes him to the hospital. Faraday discovers that the boy's mild-mannered parents, Oliver and Cheryl Lang (Tim Robbins and Joan Cusack), live across the street, and a friendship ensues. Faraday lives with his son, Grant (Spencer Treat Clark), and is widowed. A graduate student girlfriend, Brooke (Hope Davis), has replaced his wife, an FBI agent who died in an accidental shoot-out with a rural family in West Virginia as a result of intelligence misinformation.

As Grant and the Langs' son, Brady (Mason Gamble) become close friends, Faraday grows more and more wary of the Langs. Grant and Brady pretend to "build a compound," and Faraday sees some suspicious blueprints in Oliver Lang's study. He confides in Brooke, who thinks his fears are a projection of the trauma of the loss of his wife. Faraday begins to research Lang's history, picking through his mail and calling his hometown Hall of Records. He learns that Lang changed his name from William Fenimore, and that he put a pipe bomb in a government office as a sixteen-year-old boy. As Faraday becomes convinced of his neighbor's deception, his quest begins to alienate his girlfriend and son. Oliver Lang discovers Faraday's snooping and angrily confronts him, explaining that his father was ruined when government bureaucrats decided to redirect a stream on the Fenimore family farm. Lang's father committed suicide to attempt to get health insurance for his family, and left a note for his son (Oliver, né William Fenimore) instructing him never to trust the government. After placing the pipe bomb at a local post office ("I was a stupid kid," Lang explains), he took an opportunity to change his name so his children would not one day be ashamed of their father's juvenile crime. Faraday is convinced and goes by the Lang house later to apologize for his suspicions.

While shopping one day, however, Brooke sees Oliver Lang exchange a briefcase with a woman in a parking garage. Following him, she becomes suspicious. The Langs, revealing their "hidden" identities, catch and murder her, making her death appear to be a car accident. Though Faraday momentarily believes his suspicions were erroneous, he quickly learns that Lang can be connected (through a scout group, the Junior Explorers) to the bombing of a federal building in St. Louis. Remembering that Grant is on a scouting trip with Brady, Faraday madly drives to pick him up, only to find that the Langs have already kidnapped Grant.

Recognizing that Faraday has discovered their plan to bomb

the FBI building, the Langs hold Grant hostage in exchange for his silence. One routine car chase and an inane fistfight later, Faraday follows a van that he believes carries his son and a bomb to the FBI building. He chases it into a parking garage, but the van is empty. The trunk of Faraday's car, however, is full of plastic explosives (presumably placed there by Lang), and the explosion demolishes the FBI building. In the penultimate scene, news reports narrate the tragic event, explaining that police believe that Faraday, disgruntled at the FBI because of his wife's accidental death, bombed the building. Faraday becomes another in a long line of American "lone nut" bombers.

### Terrorism in the Home that is not a Home

Considering the meanings of the German word "*heimlich*," Freud notes in a famous 1919 essay that while it might best be translated as "homelike" or "familiar," *unheimlich*, its ostensible antonym, can imply either "unfamiliar" or "familiar." Exploring further, he discovers that the definitions of the words merge. He writes that:

Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a subspecies of *heimlich* (1919:347).

The inherent ambiguity of these terms, for Freud, makes them ideal descriptions for a particular kind of fear—that which Freud calls the uncanny. The uncanny is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1919:340). It is a unique type of fear—one that derives from a situation that is seemingly normal, harmless, or familiar but somehow is not. The uncanny is inexplicably or intuitively different, almost but not quite right. Indeed, critical to the notion of the uncanny is that it frustrates the senses, particularly sight. Nothing *looks* different, but it somehow strangely is. Perhaps in a mode akin to *déjà vu*, the uncanny is elusive and just outside the realm of conscious perception.

For Freud, the uncanny is horrifying because it harkens back to the process of subject formation, when instinctual urges are "turned back" on themselves, creating a distinction between the unconscious and conscious mind. Also conceptualized as the forces of the id, these

unconscious instincts resemble what Nietzsche called “bodily instincts” in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and represent libido and aggression but also the energy or movement of nondifferentiation. Nondifferentiation, in this sense, refers to the lack of distinction between self and other that, for Freud and Lacan, dissolves when the child is forced to confront the semiotic order (i.e., the process of subject formation). This foundational trauma, the break from the undifferentiated world of the pre-Oedipal and the separation of self and other, also creates the superego. “Able to treat the rest of the ego like an object,” this agency allows for a certain “doubling” of the ego (1919:357). Perhaps akin to the sensation of seeing oneself on film, the superego makes the ego perceived both from the “inside” (in the example, consciousness) and the “outside” (in this case, the sight of oneself). It is this “double,” both reminder and reinscription of the initial Oedipal trauma, that haunts the subject in the uncanny. The double, of course, is both the same and not the same, as the image of oneself that one sees on film is never quite how one sees oneself “from the inside.”

In my mind, the “terror” of *Arlington Road* derives precisely from its status as an uncanny text, one in which things are the same but not the same. Denaturalizing formative American spaces, it radically reveals the repressed uncanny. In the inaugural scene, for example, the horrifying image of a badly injured, bleeding Brady Lang is superimposed on the immaculate lawns and white picket fences of a quiet, clean, and safe suburban neighborhood. Filmed like a classical dream sequence, the scene utilizes a rotating camera, photographically negative images, and skewed angles to engender a horrifyingly “ghostly” quality to the suburbs, a space many spectators might see as a safe and comfortable home to (white) middle-class families. The film exposes the ghosts of quotidian spaces, making a baseball field and a scout meeting, emblems of Americana, vaguely, inexplicably unsettling. That which is elided from these spaces, repressed in order to make them “safe,” is precisely that which threatens to return—insecurity, sinister intentions, and random violence.

The uncanny discomfort of the film centers itself around the characters of the Langs, the terrorists of the 1990s. Indeed, the film’s most prominent narrative device is their seeming “normalness.” Hardly the wild-eyed unkempt Muslim of *Under Siege* or *Delta Force*, Oliver Lang is a mild-mannered, sweater-wearing structural engineer from

Kansas. Coupled with a mousy housewife and three children, the family lacks only a dog to match the stereotype of a “typical” American family. The film lingers in the domestic spaces of their house, injecting a sense of discomfiting dread into kitchens and backyards. Faraday spends several anxious minutes searching Oliver Lang’s innocuous office, eventually finding hidden plans that he believes expose a bombing plan. The uncanny of the film, then, follows Freud in focusing on domestic space—it is precisely the “un-home-like” home that is unsettling. Uniquely, it is the family and its history that unnerve both Michael Faraday and the spectator. Angrily discussing the Langs with Brooke, Faraday specifies the domestic nature of his fear, shouting “That house is not normal!”

This representation of the terrorist, as horrifyingly indistinguishable from white suburbanites, might have interestingly ambiguous political effects on the spectator. Terrorist films of the 1980s justified increased foreign military expenditures and stricter immigration measures (Kellner 1995, Rogin 1993, Jeffords 1993), but *Arlington Road* refocuses the lens of security on potential domestic insurgency. This is perhaps trickier because the “terror” the terrorists provoke is precisely their resistance to easy identification, their inability to be seen. Lang’s excessive use of the word “neighbor,” especially after it becomes clear that he intends to destroy the FBI building, reminds the spectator of how little he or she really knows about their community. Anyone, even a seemingly normal person, might be a terrorist. As such, this invisible terror might inspire support for increased surveillance and decreased civil liberties, resembling the situation described by Tina Rosenberg in her article on the East German secret police, the Stasi (1996). When anyone can be a potential subversive (or terrorist), every citizen is turned into a potential informer. Citizens become agents of the state, spying on themselves in an obsessive hope to maintain order (1996:302). Indeed, increased support for increased police powers is precisely what happened in the United States with the passage of the Omnibus crime bill immediately after the Oklahoma City bombing (Parfrey 1995). Incorporating footage and fictionalized accounts of the Oklahoma bombing into its narrative, *Arlington Road* rather bluntly reiterates these fears, warning of the dangerous potential for another bombing.

On another level, however, the ambiguous, uncanny representation of the Langs and suburban America frustrates what Norval calls

the “condition of modernity” (1994:132). For Norval, the logic of the modern state involves a constant struggle against ambiguity and indeterminacy. In other words, there is a logic to the discourses of the state—one that denies and represses that which it cannot categorize. In Norval’s words, the state draws “political frontiers” to sharply distinguish itself from its “others” (1994:120). In this sense, if modern social identity is structured around the strict distinction between self and other, the inability of the spectator (and Faraday) to define the Langs—as normal or abnormal, allies or enemies, law-abiding or terrorist—creates a situation of potential political rupture. Norval explains that:

. . . the indeterminate has a subversive potential precisely because it undermines the very logic of identity upon which the order-chaos polarity is found. Indeterminacy resists reduction to either of the categories, and thus subverts the very principle upon which oppositionality and, as others might argue, the whole of Western metaphysics is based (1994:132).

For Norval, then, indeterminacy might be seen as an aesthetic that resists the positivist logic of the state. If a spectator is unable to determine whether or not the Langs are, “in fact,” terrorists, simple demonization of “terrorists” becomes a more difficult conceptual task. Incapable of trusting their senses (one cannot *see* if the Langs are terrorists), spectators can no longer distinguish terrorists by the color of their skin. In this sense, the uncanniness of the Langs frustrates the very mechanisms by which terrorists of the 1970s and 1980s were easily identified.

In addition, by denaturalizing spaces like the scout troop and batting cage, the film potentially exposes their role in constructing a nation. The discomfort provoked by the desanctification of the scout troop, for example, encourages us both to notice the power of the scout troop as national trope and to reevaluate its status as a “safe,” entirely “American” space. Though it might provoke totalitarian responses in some, *Arlington Road*’s uncanny representation of the terrorist and domestic spaces undermines the very binary logic that permits the construction of a terrorist “other” to the state.

The film does attempt to recuperate this ambiguity textually.

While the spectator cannot be entirely sure of the Langs' sinister intentions until Brooke's murder, the film's final scenes use standard "terrorist" tropes to demonize Oliver Lang. Revealing that he actually murdered the "best friend" whose name he took (he claims it was a hunting accident earlier in the film), using increasingly "fundamentalist" Christian language that identifies him with the already "otherized" religious right, and declaring his willingness to sacrifice children for his cause, Lang rapidly becomes a much less ambiguous or sympathetic figure. The recuperation, however, is not entirely successful. Unlike the one-dimensionally "greedy" or "fanatical" terrorists of the 1980s (Zulaika and Douglass 1996), Oliver Lang has already been allowed to articulate both his history and his political platform. His history of (inadvertent) victimization at the hands of the government humanizes him and puts his political beliefs into historical context. His anger is understandable, even if his methods are clearly demonized by the text. Indeed, even his methods are far "saner" than the terrorists of the 1980s. Lang has a carefully considered plan that stems from neither blinding hatred nor a desire for publicity. His intentions are revolutionary, not maniacal. In a sense, then, the film resists the trope of the pathologized terrorist, in part because the uncanniness of a white male terrorist confounds earlier terrorist imaginaries. The film is not totally successful in its attempt to reinscribe the "terror" of the terrorist onto Oliver Lang. The white, patriotic American man, it seems, resists the superimposition of traditional terrorist discourse.

### **Nationalizing the Family; Familiarizing the Nation**

The family is not an unfamiliar symbol of the nation. From conservative emphases on "family values" as moral models for the nation to dismissals of dissident groups as "wayward children," the nation's political imaginary is rife with semiotic links between the family and the state. Further, the nation is structured like the patriarchal family, with a masculine leader and domestic, often feminized citizens. Patricia Hill Collins' extensive analysis connects the nation to the family in terms of naturalized hierarchical structure, notions of "home," genetic linkages, duties and privileges of membership, and "family planning" (Hill Collins 1998; see Taylor 1997 and Siegel 1998 for international examples). As the nation is the family writ large, then, so is the family the nation writ small. In US film, the trope of the family/nation

has been repeated in genres as diverse as the Western and film noir (e.g., Modleski 1988, Wood 1986, and Boose 1993).

In *Arlington Road*, this trope is structured around Faraday's dead wife, Leah, and the sons of the Faraday and Lang families. The time before Leah's death is clearly demarcated as one free of familial strife, and it is apparently only after her accidental death that a lack of absolute faith in the FBI and the government arises. In other words, it is only after Leah's death that the uncanny comes to haunt Faraday. The trauma of her loss recalls Freud's trauma of subject formation, of departure from an idealized realm to one haunted by doubts and ambiguities. Her ghost haunts all of Faraday's social relationships, particularly with his son. Visibly struggling as a single father, Faraday's ability to deal with his son is clearly hindered by the absence of his wife.

If Leah's image represents an idealized past, the children's bodies function as a kind of *tabula rasa* on which the future of the nation is inscribed. Faraday's suspicion of the Langs is enabled by concerns about their influence on his son, particularly through the Junior Explorers scout troop. His mad chase at the end of the film is to save his son, and the dialogue during the fistfight between Lang and Faraday centers around Faraday's accusation that "[Lang] stands for blowing up families and orphaned sons" and Lang's rejoinder, that "children die in a war." Ultimately, these men are fighting about the future of the nation, inscribed upon their families.

If the family is a site of contestation over the nation, then the idealized all-American nuclear family (and its concurrent fantasy of organic nation) is precisely what Faraday lacks. Traumatized by Leah's death, Faraday continues her work, teaching a course in "American Terrorism" and maintaining contact with her FBI partner. He brings her up in conversation numerous times, with Grant, his girlfriend Brooke, and the Langs. Significantly, he takes his class to Copper Creek, the West Virginia site where his wife was killed. In a sequence that bluntly reenacts the actual FBI battle with "separatist" Randy Weaver and his family at Ruby Ridge, Faraday narrates the story of his wife's death. Faraday's family, then, was lost to an ambiguously defined "domestic terrorism"—precisely that which he suspects is behind the Langs' all-American façade. Obsessively, Faraday tries to recover his lost family, his lost sense of *heimlich*, by rooting out terrorism in all quarters.

Faraday's relentless quest to uncover the Langs' secret might

be read through a reworking of several key Freudian notions, in Jacques Lacan's famous treatise on the mirror stage (1949). In the mirror stage, an individual is confronted by his (or her, though Lacan's subject is masculine) image in a mirror and misrecognizes his image as a whole, coherent, self-controlled version of himself. This contrasts markedly to the limited and incoherent "self" that inhabits the spectator's body. For Lacan, this misrecognition centers around the infant's lack of motor control, but in film, structures of characterization are more significant. A relationship, then, in which the partial and unsatisfied self (the ego-ideal that inhabits the realm of the Symbolic, in Lacanian terms) longs to become the whole, coherent, and unified self in the mirror (the ideal-ego that inhabits the Imaginary) forms the structure of desire engendered by the mirror stage (Lacan 1949).

Though Lacan saw the mirror stage as a moment in childhood development, its structure might be used to analyze the psychic process of desire and identification more generally. Critically, however, this structure, in which the subject is constituted by its lack, must be constantly reinscribed to retain its efficacy. Building on Freud's analysis of trauma (after the loss of a loved one, in this case literally Faraday's wife but figuratively his family and nation), Judith Butler writes in *The Psychic Life of Power* that:

The "I" is thus fundamentally threatened by the specter of this (impossible) love's reappearance and remains condemned to reenact that love unconsciously, repeatedly reliving and displacing that scandal, that impossibility, orchestrating that threat to one's sense of "I" (1997:8).

Critical to this structure of lack and desire, then, is the notion of repetition. The loss or absence of the loved object must be constantly reinscribed and reiterated to reinforce the desiring mechanism. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida similarly emphasizes frequency when he discusses "the specter," which he sees as always outside of the limited present (1994:99; also Salecl 1994:211). Indeed, the specter of the nation or the idealized family demands obsessive repetition. Derrida writes that:

The specter, as its name indicates, is the *frequency* of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. . . . The

specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see. . . . The social mode of haunting, its original style could also be called, taking into account this repetition, *frequentation* (1994:101).

In *Arlington Road*, these moments of traumatic loss and subsequent haunting are only accessible to the spectator through mediation or narration. As mentioned, Faraday narrates the sequence in which his wife is killed, bringing himself to tears as he retells the story of his loss to himself. His wife's image is invoked numerous times, particularly after disputes with his son, clearly indexing her absence. Intriguingly, all of the film's traumatic losses are narrated, not presented directly to the spectator. Both Leah Faraday's death and the opening scene, in which Brady Lang loses his hand, are filmed in typical "dream" fashion, while both Brooke's and Faraday's death are relayed through news reports and the final account of the bombing and Faraday's demise are projected onto a "normal" street scene in Washington, D.C. These narrations of trauma are, of course, doubly narrated since they are set in the film's diegesis. There is no unmediated trauma, then, no story of loss that is not always already narrativized. Further, the logic of repetition and frequentation insures that trauma is continually re-narrated, re-engaging psychic structures of loss and desire.

Faraday's constant reiteration of his trauma and his obsessive quest to expose Oliver Lang can be seen as a desperate attempt to return to the imaginary, "whole" family that existed before his wife's death. Indeed, as he confides his increasing suspicions to Brooke, she bitterly notes that "it's all about Leah—the whole thing." Faraday's frenzied drive to relive Leah's work and recapture the imaginary family he once "had" might be seen as following what Norval calls "identitary logic," described as:

. . . the logic of what is involved in the process of identity construction, in its broadest sense, wherein the impossibility of bridging the gap between identification and the reaching of a fully fledged identity, is denied (1994:119).

Faraday's denial of the impossibility of a return to the idealized days of organic family, then, signals his refusal to de-identify with

the imperiled nation. This psychic identification has a material corollary—Faraday identifies himself with the “actual” state of the film, essentially doing its work for it as he roots out “terrorism.” Willing to use methods officially forbidden to the state (misrepresenting himself on the telephone, misleading the Lang children so he can search their father’s study), Faraday assumes his wife’s role as an agent of the state, acting to preserve it at all costs. Here, the spectator enters a dangerous realm in which identification with Faraday is also identification with the (logic of) the state.

The uncanny, however, complicates and frustrates this identity logic in several ways. Initially and most obviously, Faraday’s work on behalf of the interests of the state is ultimately exposed to be in the service of the movement the Langs represent. Though the placement of the bomb in the back of his rented car seems like a rather strained plot device, it indicates that the Langs have anticipated Faraday’s actions for some time. Indeed, it threatens to expose Faraday’s (and the state’s) entire quest as a result of psychological manipulation. Carrying the bomb into FBI headquarters, he ultimately acts not as the agent of the state and family he thinks he is, but as a Manchurian candidate—one who is an assassin without knowing it.

Secondly, Faraday’s quest to expose the Langs is confused on a psychic level, and its complexities might further expose some of the mechanisms of psychic desire. Specifically, it is significant that the Langs superficially represent precisely that which Faraday laments the loss of—a conflict-free white heterosexual “American” nuclear family. In carrying on his wife’s work and interrogating the Langs’ history and domestic space, he strives to puncture or expose precisely that organic family that he so desires. Faraday’s drive is to uncover what lies behind the veneer of the “normal” American family, to expose a traumatic and constructed history. His actions threaten to make clear that the semiotic linkage between the ideal family and the nation is a false one. The Langs look like every other suburban family, and exposing them therefore risks an interrogation of every other suburban family. Their family structure is exposed as a convenient front for their anti-government activities, and in this sense they simply “perform” the normal American family. Since the Langs can effectively “pass” for a real family, the very definition of “family” is called into question. Revealed as a performance, then, family has no intrinsic connection to notion of the American national and cultural authenticity. Until the

dubiously successful recuperation of the final third of the movie, the Langs perform family so well as to expose the imaginary unity that Faraday longs for as an empty signifier and a superficial marker that contains no “essence” of the American nation. As such, the nation is exposed as an unfixed concept, perhaps in line with Bowman’s description:

The ‘nation’ in the discourse of an established national entity is an imprecise and effectively nebulous mythological concept which is, because of that imprecision, open to appropriation by its readers. In other words, the concept of the nation retains its grip on the imaginary of its population precisely by remaining unfixed. . . . This unfixedity can be maintained, however, as long as the persistence of the nation is taken for granted; as soon as the nation is discursively posited as endangered, battle lines are drawn and processes of selective exclusion/inclusion are set in play (1994:144).

Bowman’s useful reminder, that positing the state as fixed endangers its fluidity, explains the potential political effect of the denaturalization of the family. If fixity is required to draw a boundary between the state and its terrorist “other,” or between a “normal” American family and its other, these attempts at symbolic manipulation seem hollow in the face of a performed, imagined family and nation. Faraday’s drive to destroy the image of the Langs (and the nation), then, is a self-destructive one, since it aims to destroy the very imaginary image on which both his subjectivity and the nation are founded. The allegory plays itself out literally, obviously, in the explosion that destroys both Michael Faraday and the FBI building.

Tearing holes in US political imaginaries of terrorism, the Oklahoma City bombing destroyed more than the Murrah Federal Building. No longer able to conceptualize “the terrorist” as a profoundly different ethnic other, US political discourses are undergoing a restructuring to cope with the threat of the white male terrorist. *Arlington Road*, though hardly a critically acclaimed film, opens an allegorical window into the effects this change has had on US culture. In sharp distinction to terrorist films of the 1980s, the film is unable to entirely demonize the figure of the terrorist. Rather, ambiguity and the uncanny plague the entire film like they do US public culture. Seeing

uncontrollably into spaces of repression, this ambiguity threatens the most basic American institutions. Indeed, the film threatens to expose both the nation and the family as empty signifiers. Following Bowman, then, the film functions both as an allegory of discursive change and as a text that interpellates a set of spectatorial positions. In this case, the effect on the spectator is profoundly confused. While the film might encourage a vigilant guard against “terror,” it also works to destabilize the very binary statist logic that permits the construction of the “terrorist.” Left without an obvious enemy, the state and its faithful citizens may begin to doubt the sanctity of their own identities.

## Notes

1. “Terrorist,” like “cult,” is a patently politicized label. Rather than signifying a fundamental difference in ideology or tactics, the name “terrorist” denotes a marginalized political actor, represented pejoratively in part due to a political program contrary to the state. The state, of course, uses violence to achieve its ends (both foreign and domestic), but is hardly represented as “terrorist” in mainstream media (Zulaika and Douglass 1996). I put the term in quotation marks here to designate its arbitrary application. Having done so, it is unquoted in the rest of the essay.

2. Tony Bennett’s essay on “Text and Social Process: The Case of James Bond” is particularly useful here. Cautiously considering the politics of textual analysis, he writes that “the reader’s response cannot be deduced from an analysis of the formal properties of the texts; . . . there are independent determinations bearing on the ideological and cultural formation of the reader which must be taken account of in order to analyze the history and social distribution of the varying aesthetic and political responses” (1982:5). I follow Bennett’s dictum that texts ought to be considered in their political and discursive contexts—in this case, the politics of terrorism in the nuclear era.

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