



It took so many drafts to pinpoint the topic I would finally be working with, but I began this paper assigned to draw connections between religious violence and some cultural “text”. I

chose the surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* for its unexpected quality, a text I believed would spark my professor’s interest. Ironically, my paper evolved to argue that both religious violence and surrealist art engage the reader with their shock value, but this tactic that I would eventually write about went unrealized as I crafted my final argument. In an earlier draft, I had written that violent images of the film were meant specifically to “shock, horrify, and confuse” viewers. While looking over this draft during a workshop, I remember Professor Mahn pulling out these words, asking “Isn’t this exactly what terrorism does?”, and then punching my classmate in excitement. Workshops like these helped me walk through my incoherent thoughts, and I began to recognize how violence in the name of religion remains incomprehensible or unjustified to people, and make the connections to the film.

Walking into a gallery of contemporary art, many stumble upon a canvas with an incredulous look on their face, struggling to understand its meaning. Yet we mull over the artwork, attempting to construct meaning because of the inherent assumption that the artist had specific intentions. Acts of terrorism are not given this benefit of the doubt, and we often instead assume that terrorists hope to shed blood merely to relieve their angst. My initially “irrational” (that is to say, incomprehensible) draft was given consideration by my professor though, allowing its final meaning to emerge as we discussed it and I wrote and rewrote. With irrationality comes the need for heightened attention; this is how surrealist art and terrorism reveal their message.

The Relevance of (Ir)Rationality: An Investigation Across Art and Religion

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Writing 20 (Spring 2007): Re-Placing Religion
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As violence in the name of religion becomes more prevalent in modern times, some turn to the incompatibility of religion and modernity as the troublesome source. Sam Harris suggests that religion has no place in the modern world, serving virtually no useful function because, simply, it is irrational; faith often directly contradicts rational scientific explanations for phenomena in the natural world. However, it seems that two extremely significant entities in the human experience, art and religion, are often defined by their irrational qualities. Didier Maleuvre acknowledges that the significance of this quality is usually disregarded, writing, “The modern mind does not believe in objects, processes or phenomena that transcend or escape physiological, logical, or rational necessity.” The world has grown to be increasingly dictated by scientific discovery and concrete fact, neglecting to acknowledge the value of that which is not considered “rationally necessary.”¹ As religion attempts to explain phenomena in a world science can more concretely clarify, it is considered increasingly archaic and dangerous. But irrational art, which may very well be much less of a rational necessity than religion (considering its lack of any sort of practical purpose) seems to be merely considered a respectable frivolity. Why is it that such irrationality in religion is so much more difficult to embrace than in art?

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By taking a closer look at specific examples of such irrationality—terrorism (as an irrational action done in the name of religion) and surrealism (as a school of art)—the reason may seem obvious: while surrealist art is shocking, terrorism is tangibly dangerous. Beliefs from religion seem to have a deep influence on behavior, while art, for the most part, does not. It is interesting though to recognize that irrationality itself has the potential to be meaningful. The realization that irrationality may be meaningful can, and should, also be applied to its role in terrorism. Looking at the deliberations of Sam Harris and Didier Maleuvre on religion and art as irrational, we can understand how it came to be considered such. Using Mark Juergensmeyer’s argument that terrorism is comparable to a form of art, we will connect the motives behind the irrational in surrealism to such motives in terrorism. Through this investigation we can begin to see how irrationality itself is in fact a valuable attribute contributing to different areas of the human experience.

¹ Didier Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality: Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 1.

Religion's Value *Despite Irrationality*

Religion, according to Sam Harris, is harmful and irrational because it requires an ignorance of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, this ignorance is perpetuated because it remains unquestioned in the name of faith, and is then used to justify actions whose motives would otherwise be considered questionable.

Religious violence, Harris claims, stems from the more basic issue of the irrationality of religion itself. In his book, *The End of Faith*, Harris attributes much of religious violence to literalistic interpretations of texts that have supposedly descended from a higher power.² This “scriptural literalism,” he claims, is problematic because modern cultural developments have “rendered many of God’s utterances difficult to accept as written.”³ While recognizing the presence of both religious moderates and religious extremists, Harris reveals his insight that religion in modernity is both unnecessary and harmful. “The idea that any of our religions represents the infallible word of One True God,” he writes, “requires encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained.”⁴ Harris continually references the anachronistic and thus contradictory role that religion plays in a world of progress. Moreover, religion grants permission for unfounded beliefs because criticism of another’s faith is considered taboo. The danger of unquestioned faith is that beliefs become a determining factor in the life of the faithful. Beliefs become a “lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person’s life... [They] are mere words—until you believe them. Once believed, they become the very apparatus of your mind, determining your desires, fears, expectations, and subsequent behavior.”⁵ Harris cites such blind faith in the words of disputable texts as the excuse for religious violence. He once again returns to the idea of

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rationality, arguing that religious faith is “simply beyond the scope of rational discourse” and seems to view religion only through the lens of strict belief, unable and unwilling to change or adapt to modern cultures.⁶ Harris emphasizes the obsolete quality of traditional religion because, he believes, “most of what we currently hold sacred is not sacred for any reason other than that it was thought sacred *yesterday*.”⁷ He further emphasizes the role that this anachronism plays, writing “Our past is not sacred for being past, and there is much that is behind us that we are struggling to keep behind us.”⁸ According to Harris, the literalistic interpretation of certain creeds has led to such violence as sacrifice, executions, castration, stoning of heretics, and the latest incarnation of religious violence, terrorism.

The main problem with Harris’ claim is that it ignores the possibility that religion is mobile, changing with the world and thus reconcilable with modernity. Religion has acquired, by popular use, a distorted definition, coming to signify a “particular mode of adoring a supernatural but incomprehensible Being.”⁹ Religion still includes this belief in a higher power, but it does not necessarily connote a stubborn dependence. While modern religion may still rely on a Being that seems to be irrational (defying reason, in this case), it does so in order to comfort and guide the faithful in the face of what

² Harris specifically cites the Biblical passage in Deuteronomy that directly charges the Jew or Christian to stone a loved one to death for heresy. This verse is followed shortly by the words from God, “What I am now commanding you, you must keep and observe, adding nothing to it, taking nothing away.” (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* [New York: WW Norton, 2004] 18).

³ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: WW Norton, 2004) 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ While Harris focuses his greatest attack on religious conservatives, he does not limit his argument against religion to only such extremists. While religious extremists err on the side of being too literalistic, religious moderates opt to interpret and ignore much of traditional religious canon “in the interest of living in the modern world.” For example, in Catholic and other conservative Christian traditions, homosexuality is explicitly condemned as a serious sin. However, in its growing popularity, many Catholics choose not to condemn homosexuality in the way they may condemn others considered guilty of “serious sin.” He finds this cherry-picking remedy to be fallible, believing that the faithful should not be able to follow only what is convenient; using faith as justification for other actions taken “in the name of God” becomes, then, an unreliable excuse.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹ Frederic Harrison, *The Positive Evolution of Religion* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1913) 10. While Harrison formulated this idea nearly a century ago, it is still applicable today, and the time gap merely emphasizes the idea that religion had already come a long way from simplistic worship of an ‘incomprehensible Being.’

remains unexplained, much of which there most certainly will be for some time to come. Religion today provides a source of community as well as stimulation for acts of kindness and service. Arguably, both art and religion are not irrational in today's world for their incompatibility with reason, but a provision of inspiration to stimulate the human experience. Rather than valuing the practice of strict rationality, we can come to understand religious irrationality as meaningful in the same way that the irrationality of art has gained significance.

Art's Value Is its Irrationality

Art may be considered irrational because it often does not simply render reality in rational, or even realistic, terms. Pieces such as Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, best known for its images of melting clocks, are stubbornly unrealistic; yet art that interprets reality rather than mimics it is often more highly valued than exactness, such as portraiture. Even in photography, the best photos are not simple snapshots, but are planned carefully to suit the meaning of the artwork.

Religion and art are similar in that they both entail an investigation of the human experience, an exploration of our physical reality by artists and believers. Art places its roots in the mimicry of reality—beginning with meticulous imitations; it has evolved into a more modern form, which toys with the representation of reality by representing, but not replicating, images in actuality. Artwork depicts, portrays, and illustrates images as understood by personal interpretation, which may extend beyond reality. Unlike in religion, this irrationality (or avoidance of literal representation) is not considered a negative quality; it is instead considered acceptable, if not valued more highly for its avant-garde qualities. Didier Maleuvre claims, "A good artist can always render his sitter's looks. But to make us converse with the represented, indeed to draw us into a presence—this earmarks the great artist. Resemblance is a skill and can be learned... This is why it betokens immense intelligence and warmth when a photographer overcomes the natural iciness of the lens."¹⁰ Maleuvre values, as many critics do, the quality of a piece to elicit interpretation, because it goes beyond what we witness in everyday life and offers us a fresh perspective.

Some still find it difficult to accept the value of contemporary art because it seems so abstract. However, it is widely understood that there exists some

element of value because it is considered innovative and meaningful. The unlikely and often nonsensical images found in contemporary art force viewers to really consider it, and it offers a new vantage point, an escape for viewers from their usual way of looking at the world. This collective understanding of the value of artwork is seldom applied to religious violence. The sheer horror of terrorism often comes across as markedly irrational, ill-intentioned and nothing more. However, in light of the value of irrationality in surrealist artwork, one may be able to better understand the function of terrorism. Many are unable to comprehend that there may be any meaning behind terrorism. But just as contemporary artwork may simply seem to be a jumble of images while it actually guards meaning, terrorism should not be disregarded as meaningless. By looking at similarities between terrorism and the contemporary art movement of surrealism, we may gain a better vantage point on the function of terrorism.

The Value of Violence?

The surrealist movement was meant to revolutionize the human experience from what was seen as false rationality, and restrictive customs and structures in the modern world. In a sense, the motives behind this school of art can be applied to the motives of religious violence, or terrorism. While both may not be rational, they are perhaps intentionally this way—to break past the barriers that confine our minds and that disallow creative engagement.

Terrorism is not simply an act of violence meant to cause confrontation; it hopes to achieve something further. Mark Juergensmeyer acknowledges this, and attempts to see past the horror rather than immediately discount religious violence. "By calling acts of religious terrorism 'symbolic' I mean that they are intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate target: a grander conquest, for instance, or a struggle more awesome than meets the eye."¹¹ Terrorism, he claims, serves a specific purpose, to call attention to itself and make a point: "Acts of terrorism are usually the products of an internal logic and not of random crazy thinking."¹² This attention-getting mechanism he more aptly characterizes as a "theater of terror." He writes, "They are mind-numbing, mesmerizing theater. At center stage are the acts themselves. Stunning, abnormal, and outrageous murders carried out in a way that graphically displays the awful power of violence."¹³

¹⁰ Didier Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality: Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 168.

¹¹ Mark Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 123.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 22.

A piece of surrealist art entitled *Un Chien Andalou* was once questioned in a similar manner, condemned for its violent and shocking images and simultaneously disregarded as meaningless. This film, written and directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí in 1929, was founded on the surrealist movement, which comprised visual art and writings featuring unexpected juxtapositions, the element of surprise, and non-sequitur clippings. True to surrealist nature, the intentional irrationality seems to lack any sort of plot, in the most conventional sense of the word, and is instead full of disjointed, high-impact images. It begins with the slicing of a woman's eye through her pupil with a sharpened blade, and continues in a non-sensical display of vaguely correlated images. While critics offer many varied interpretations, Buñuel himself claimed that the only rule for the writing of the script was that "no idea or image that might lend itself to *rational* explanation of any kind would be accepted."¹⁴ The entire film is highly symbolic, allowing almost no room for any sort of easily accessible meaning. Rather, in its historical context, this film was

truly unconventional and designed to shock, horrify, and confuse viewers. This is exactly the effect that terrorism has upon its own audience. When a terrible act of terrorism occurs, the determined "audience" (in a sense, the public as a whole) is truly shocked that such a thing would happen, horrified at the effect, and confused about the motives. While *Un Chien Andalou* is most certainly unconventional (in its means of conveying its message), it does not lose credibility as artwork in modernity. However, the same shocking quality that terrorism shares tends to detract from any sort of appraisal of its meaning. On the contrary, *Un Chien Andalou* as well as many other pieces of contemporary artwork, actually gains credence because it is considered innovative. While the surrealist film attracts attention and inspires discussion because of its "irrationality," terrorism is immediately cast aside because of the sheer horror of the event.

The violent imagery in *Un Chien Andalou* serves a grander purpose, and the same may be said of terrorism. The unconventional images often found in surrealism are meant to break down the barriers of consciousness and attempt to access the subconscious.

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The violent images used in the film are, as Buñuel stated himself, merely an attack on the viewer in order to awaken the mind and engage active thinking. The awareness of reality requires only passive observation, but the appreciation of artwork requires active participation on the part of the viewer. This intentional "attack" is, I believe, quite similar to the workings of terrorism. In terrorism the actual act of violence is often relatively less important than the message it is trying to convey. This violent attack jolts the audience from apathy and ignorance of the issues terrorists wish to call attention to. Often, the actual act of religious

violence shows little strategic value and is merely dramatic to attract attention, to engage the bystanders. Mark Juergensmeyer looks to the nature of violence, noting how terrorist acts have been ones "not only of destruction but also of bloodshed executed in a deliberately intense and vivid way... as if these acts were designed to maximize the savage nature of their violence and meant purposely to elicit anger."¹⁵ These acts of violence are broadcast across various forms of public media, purposefully dramatic in order

to have a large impact. This intended effect, however, seems to be often misconstrued and backfires. The public is incensed by the extremity of the violence and too distracted to realize that the act may also carry further meaning. For example, the bombing of the World Trade Center was not intended to serve any immediate political benefits; the crash did not directly attack any individual or group who had offended the terrorists. A convicted felon of the World Trade Center attack, Mahmud Abouhalima, admitted in an interview that the assaults on public buildings were performed for a long-range goal of "identify[ing] the government as the enemy."¹⁶ This extremely distant end was intended to justify the dramatic events, intended only as symbolically significant. Terrorist acts are meant to try and raise awareness to stimulate change, often socially or politically. Just as the appreciation of artwork requires an active participation on the part of the viewer, an "appreciation," or at least understanding, of the intended message of terrorism requires engagement from the public.

In both terrorism and surrealism, shocking imagery can either be misinterpreted as needlessly irrational

¹⁴ Great Movies: *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), RogerEbert.com, 2007, available from <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20000416/REVIEWS08/401010369/1023>; Internet, accessed April 2, 2007. The word "rational" has been emphasized by me.

¹⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.



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or have the intended “awakening” effect. Or it can do both—shocking and awakening while offending the audience at the same time. In an essay on the reading of *Un Chien Andalou*, Jenaro Taléns discusses the condition of such passivity, asserting that “No voluntary act is exacted other than going to a movie theater, buying a ticket at the box office, and sitting in a dark room... From that moment on, the spectator simply can let the images impregnate his or her retina in what we could define as a state of ‘nonattentive vision.’”¹⁷ Incidentally, this describes quite nicely the way that terrorism is often passively viewed as well. If we continue with the analogy Juergensmeyer provides by comparing religious violence to a “theater of terror,” this quote describes the troublesome indifference that perhaps terrorists believe needs to be remedied. In the case of *Un Chien Andalou*, Buñuel remedies it with shocking imagery:

When Buñuel slits open the woman’s eye with a razor in close-up, the physical aggression suffered by the spectator’s sleeping sensitivity prevents the viewer from continuing to look passively, if not motivating him or her to decide to leave the movie theater at once altogether. Their mere conditioned reflex of preparing oneself for a new aggression physically forces the spectator to adopt an active attitude toward the screen.¹⁸

While it may seem as if Buñuel’s disjointed and high impact images are arbitrarily included for the sheer purpose of irrationality, this intended confusion is utilized throughout the film in order to activate the minds of the audience and make them really think about what they are seeing, a necessary step in conveying his message. Nonsensical images and irrelevant time-markers over a disordered temporal sequence are strategic means of engaging the audience.

While it seems simple to understand why gruesome fatalities are more readily considered irrational and meet with more resistance than that of harmless images in artwork, it is important to note the value of stimulating imagery in both scenarios.¹⁹ The symbolic significance of terrorist events and the visual attacks of surrealist art are multifaceted. While engaging the audience, they force view-

ers to construct meaning from the events and the outcome. This is significant because it provides an opportunity for both art and religion to allow open interpretation and access to the mind. The irrational quality of both lends itself to a mode of thinking outside the confines of the ordinary and realistic. Both terrorism and surrealism are so outrageous that they shock the mind and liberate it, opening it up to favorable territories beyond the rational.

Artwork, faith and religion: these modes of self-investigation have long provided explanations or theories stemming from the creative mind, yet presently tend to be grouped under the pejorative term ‘irrational’, and in turn condemned as impractical or beyond the realm of reason. However, impracticality should not always denote insignificance. Without the stimulation of irrationality, our world would be uninspired. We must appreciate the fact that everything does not need to be rooted in absolute reason to be beneficial.

By investigating the comparable qualities of the irrational image in both surrealism and terrorism, we can see how irrationality is not only acceptable, but also a necessary force. Rather than condemn irrationality, we should recognize its value where it is present. In religion, irrationality serves to unite and inspire a community of the faithful, often guiding them to work towards a better way of life for themselves and others. In art, it forces us to reconsider our surroundings and view it in a more constructive manner. In terrorism, the irrational violence and anger gains the attention it needs to wake up an audience from indifference and to share a message. In all these fields, irrationality is not pointlessly so; it provokes change and a new point of view. And so, arguably, things like art and religion are not irrational in modernity, but perhaps non-rational (ridding the term of its negative tone) or even supra-rational—as the nomenclature of surrealism hints—above the confines of *limiting* rationality. After all, the “irrational” serves as a source of stimulation, and consequently should be valued for itself. Perhaps the surrealist movement understood it best, acknowledging the meaningful in irrationality and aiming to use it as a means to “revolutionize the human experience.” ■

¹⁷ Jenaro Taléns, *The Branded Eye: Buñuel’s Un Chien Andalou* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 42.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ This is not meant to trivialize the deaths of those who suffered loss due to terrorism, but instead to offer a new perspective on the motives behind terrorism.