

from: Stefanie Kivi Merrath & Alexander Schwinghammer (eds)  
2011 What Does a Chameleon Look Like?  
topographies of Immersion  
Köln: Halem . pp 237-255

JOHN HUTNYK

## Undercover transports

### *Kufiya-spotting*

I have that sinking feeling again: I don't trust the chameleon. I imagine this trope with darker colours in these hypocritical and paranoid times. The chameleon is a secretive, duplicitous, furtive and somewhat sinister character. I don't like the guise. The chameleon is embedded, goes undercover, incognito, prefers covert operations, stealth, intrigues, performs with a secret agency, organizes an underground resistance, clandestine ops, a conspirator of deception. The associative range of >camouflage< and >immersion<, when thought of as something that might pass as a strategy for understanding work in the arts, humanities or social sciences, immediately invokes a range of military and official connotations that do not bode well for a progressive politics of knowledge. Journalists as well as academics have been exposed in various local dress, false stories have been planted in the press, dossier's collected that masquerade as truth, propaganda lies. There are a great many examples of dishonesty, feint and deceit that pass as truth amongst the casualty machine that is war. Increasingly war is fought in



the media theatre as well as in blood – with murderous weapons on the ground, and equally brutal engines of war on screen.

The military have always liked to dress up, often in burlesque manner, and it was only with modern warfare that flamboyance was not always a dress code. All those red tunics of Empire of yore... Contemporary wars now sport desert patters or jungle greens, and contemporary war reporters increasingly opt for battlefield chic in their to-camera reports. Television news and documentary series thrive on the new aesthetic of the embedded, combat boot wearing, hot shot on the spot presenter, mimicking military costume to stream live from Baghdad, Kabul, or the border of Gaza (as I write few journalists can enter Gaza as Israel relentlessly shells a trapped population of millions). The theatre of war has its own costume department.

This is, of course, also true of the opposition. In this chapter I will have something to say of the Palestinian scarf, the Kufiya, in relation to solidarity, resistance and fashion. I think it is important to acknowledge the symbolism of media use on several sides of the debates. In news and commentary, there are critics of war who stage their interventions with a certain style just as much as do the public relations and publicity-conscious generals. I think not only of the Japanese NHK news presenter that wore such a Kufiya every night as he reported the attacks on Baghdad in 2003, but also the role of such a scarf in the iconography of Aki Nawaz from Fun-Da-Mental, a long-time severe critic of anti-Muslim aggression. This chapter wishes to chart a politics of representation and fashion, recognising perhaps that all camouflage is war; that all fashion shoots are hostile; that all journalism happens by way of conflict. Today, whether safe at home before the screen or on the streets of ›insert battle-zone name here‹. All our reports are war stories.

There is a picture of Aki Nawaz from 1996, confronting the camera, his face hidden. I am interested in the way he wears his headscarf as a mask. Here the icon of Palestinian solidarity is put to use both as camouflage and as provocation. In the metropolitan west, and sometimes beyond, this headscarf has taken on a commercial life separate from its



Fig. 1: Aki Nawaz in 1996

political and cultural origins in the Middle East. As documented by anthropologist Ted Swedenburg, the scarf, in several variations, is now available for purchase in popular stores like American Apparel, but here Aki is marking another kind of alliance from within the context of pop. He is both mocking the glamour image of popstars, and showing solidarity with Palestine. It might be thought that Nawaz, a good looking lead singer of a then ›MTV aspirational‹ band, hides from the audience in order to enhance allure. Yes, no doubt something of the chameleon's pleasure in a confounding performance is at stake. But there is a stark political point too – and a long history of dress ups in the colonial theatre joins hands with popular music representations: soldiers in local drag, Adam Ant, mixed fashions, the uniforms of The Beatles on the Sgt Peppers Album, high military kitsch, mufti Prince Harry dressed up for a party as a member of the Nationalsozialistischen Arbeiterpartei ›desert fox‹, the Rolling Stones too kitted out as Nazi's in a 1960s



bad boys promo shoot, Madonna in a Che beret, and so on. Pop fashion is cross-stitched with international travel today. Swedenburg's excellent occasional blog archive (available at <http://swedenburg.blogspot.com/>) tracks sightings of many-hued ›Palestinian‹ scarves on popstars in the present – lamenting, it seems, that if only this cloth game might have made culture and music dangerous again there might be political purchase in the trend. He almost brings himself to applaud Justin Timberlake for wearing one (but cannot approve the song) and Sting (a surprise).<sup>214</sup> It is interesting that the checked scarf has caught on so widely since, somewhat like the white appropriation of dreadlocks it signifies an inverse identification, but if we then think of the popularity of nose-rings and kaftans in the 1960s and 1990s, despite increased anti-Asian racism and a rise of the National Front/BNP, then we might find an explanation as to why turbans never really ever caught on for western pop fans.

Aki Nawaz's most recent public use of the scarf had a role in a recent controversy that has to do with the war on terror. In its 28<sup>th</sup> June 2006 issue, *The Guardian* newspaper<sup>215</sup> found a fairly absurd headline to put above a slightly modified press release that Nation Records had put out to promote the new Fun-Da-Mental album. In effect accusing frontman Nawaz of terrorist sympathies, support for Osama bin Laden, un-British sentiments and punk sensibilities. Despite *The Guardian's* carefully distanced reporting (›Nawaz says he is prepared to face the consequences‹), this story seemed more likely to belong to the scandal-mongering *News of the World* than a left leaning intellectual broadsheet. *The Sun* duly took up the tale the next day with an inflammatory headline which proclaimed the band's ›Suicide Bomb Rap‹ had provoked ›fury‹ and led to calls from MPs for police to arrest Nawaz for ›encouraging terrorism‹.

Some might say Aki Nawaz is a past master of provocation as a sales gimmick (his earlier outings as drummer for the Southern Death Cult gives it away). He does not want to pass quietly. Yet this strategy, out of the Andrew Loog Oldham school of promotional work where ›any publicity is good publicity‹, is still a risky move. Not least because the



Fig. 2: Aki Nawaz in 2006

*Guardian* can turn itself into some sort of sensational tabloid for a day (the headline itself – ›G-had and suicide bombers: the rapper who likens Bin Laden to Che Guevara‹ – is particularly inane, but references all the storm in a tea cup fears that surround us today, and manages to tap Che Guevara on the shoulder as well). Long ago it became standard for critics to question the commitment with which a pop culture personality might profess political sentiments, and there are endless reams of discussion in the annals of the left concerning the complicity, compromises and commercialism of avowedly leftist ›cultural‹ interventions. Indeed, such a stance is a commonplace attempt to purchase credibility in a ›youth market‹ trained to consume t-shirt images of Che Guevara without contextualisation, or to sing along with Bob Dylan, or Snoop Dogg, without reference. The cynic should here point out that attempts to simultaneously sell progressive politics and culture industry product without getting some sort of molten plastic rancidity all through your clothes are futile. Turning into that which you despise is a common media refrain (the fans call this ›selling out‹).



Mere adoption of the prescribed routines of anti-establishment trademark style radicalism is never the whole story with the ever-changing Nawaz. To limit acknowledgement of his role to that of a rapper caught in a calculated commercial operation rather underplays his diverse activities as impresario of the global juke box over the past 20 years. As co-founder of Nation Records, Nawaz has been instrumental (bad pun intended) in bringing a diverse and impressive array of talent to attention: ranging from the diasporic beats of Transglobal Underground, the drum and bass of Asian Dub Foundation, the hip-hop/quaito stylings of Prophets of the City, and Qawaali artists such as Aziz Mian and more. With co-conspirator Dave Watts, Fun-Da-Mental advances a kind of alternative and left oriented version of populist world music as vehicle for a series of targeted provocations aimed at mainstream hypocrisy and racism. Often misunderstood by the music press – there were many who were enamoured at first with their radical stance – this attitude was soon simplified and dissolved into sloganeering such as calling them ›the Asian Public Enemy‹ (cp. SHARMA et al 1996; HUTNYK 2000) and versioning the band, and the Nation label, as a quixotic exotica. No doubt at times Nawaz has played up to this – his persona as rapper ›Proper-Gandhi‹ clearly marks a knowing ambiguity and many of his comments play on, and yet destabilise, conventions of British South Asian identity.

In the *Guardian* piece that broke the story of the suicide rapper, Nawaz is pictured in a post-Proper-Gandhi but still somewhat pantomime villainian pose. This could be called a disgruntled chic/sheik stance if this were not also an awful play on words. The photo the *Guardian* chose to print is particularly revealing of the iconography of terror and fear in present day Britain. Nothing is really shocking here, all the stereotypes are deployed. In the print version of this Ladbroke Grove ensemble (the *Guardian Unlimited* web image is slightly cropped) there is an English flag to the right of the picture and alongside a likely looking local resident (a clue to the staging of this shot is the caption, which edits out a likely looking ›talent agency‹ dog). I am, however, acutely interested

in that which might pass unnoticed: the bus in the background on the left is behind a young lad with a backpack – this almost accidental, anonymous scenario surely refers, with unstated but pointed significance, to the July 7 2005 London bomb anniversary, about a week away when this story was printed. I want to read the bus in this ensemble as of crucial significance. All the buttons of contemporary Islamophobia, nationalism and transport system vulnerability, and conspiracy theorising, are quietly referenced in this image. With a chameleon's wit, the photographer Martin Godwin and Nawaz contrive this scene together, and certainly Nawaz in the photograph stages a smouldering angry look – punk, make my day – though of course we can tell that inside he is smirking at the absurdity of it all.

I want to suggest that absurdity is certainly present where an iconic bus photograph is recalled by means of citation here. If the backpack behind Nawaz necessarily evokes the Tavistock Square bus bombing, it does so, intentionally or not, ironically or not, in a way at least deserving of academic attention. That this has been ignored, an icon disguised yet significant, seems a failure of analysis. Instead of any critical indication of the potency of this scene, neither by the news reporters Mark Brown and Luc Torres, nor by respected commentators, this recitation, repetition, reflection of the bus remains a silent device inside the ensemble. It associates Nawaz with the London bombers by visual proximity – a connectivity confirmed and mocked in simultaneity and in the anniversary regurgitation of the media scare.

I also want to suggest that this kind of suicide rapper event is a part of an anniversary syndrome in the culture of terror. Like clockwork it becomes the norm to raise annual threat-awareness through fabricated events. In 2006 Aki Nawaz, in 2007 the Glasgow Car Bomb hero – John Smeaton, airport baggage handler and Glasgow kisser (*Telegraph* August 1<sup>st</sup> 2007 – Smeaton's ›Scottish kiss‹ knocked the terrorist down). In 2008 it has been the trials of the carry-on-luggage video surveillance bombers, and Britain's youngest terrorist, 15 year old schoolboy Hammaad Munshi (*Guardian* September 20<sup>th</sup> 2008), the Nottingham University case in



2008 – the theatricalization of everyday life, but as slapstick, absurdity, farce. Similarly around 9-11, a series of circumstantially significant alerts, breakthroughs, trials and incidents. So much so, so regular, that their significance tends to fade – hiding this farce in the light, as Hebdige might have said (HEBDIGE 1998). I am not suggesting some of these are not ›real‹, but if you think of the case of Samina Malik, the ›lyrical terrorist‹ given a nine month suspended sentence (after 6 months in detention) in 2007 (*Guardian* June 18 2008) as a more nuanced attention-getter compared to the presence of tanks outside Heathrow in 2003, you might want to do more than repeat the scaremongering mantra of ›suicide bomber, suicide rapper‹ in an allegedly critical broadsheet.

There is always a chance that the chameleon knows that hiding is a bluff. A born politician. In his 2008 book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek (who has never had a thought that was not published, twice) writes:

»Happy are we who live under cynical public opinion manipulators, not under the sincere Muslim fundamentalists [who are] ready to fully engage themselves in their projects« (ŽIŽEK 2008: 160).

To follow the logic of this provocation, those who lament the decline of principles should probably not support cynical politicians but rather should put their faith in the fundamentalists since they really do believe their ideals. I am not so sure this irony is misplaced, but I prefer Les Back's warning of the »damaging sense of emergency and paranoia that seduces the most principled« and endorse his ›challenge‹ of »how to acknowledge these complicities without giving into phobias produced by the so-called war on terror« (BACK 2007: 138). I think it is, however, the likes of Aki Nawaz and Fun-Da-Mental who have not lost their nerve, who have stuck to radical critical principles. Who prefer confrontational visibility to conformity and disappearance. It must also be said that while Nawaz is portrayed as a cartoonish suicide rapper in *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, he is also able to use this notoriety to convey a previously unheard and unwelcome message about the hypocrisy of the so-called ›war on terror‹. The iconography works to

open forums previously unavailable for him to raise issues, provoke discussion. Soon he is invited (and invited back) onto BBC news roundtable talkback, his voice heard because he courts ›outrage‹ with his agitational views. His provocations do force issues into the open. He appears on television current affairs shows such as BBC2's *Newsnight* and *Newsnight Review*. Most recently he has been one of the celebrity activists invited to risk life and limb running the blockade of Gaza by the Israeli Navy (August 2008, on a subsequent trip the boat ›Free Gaza‹ was attacked by an Israeli Patrol Boat and damaged, and as I write in December 2008 its replacement ›The Spirit of Humanity‹ is being prevented from entering the war zone with relief supplies and much needed medical staff, see <http://www.freegaza.org/>). Thus, Nawaz uses his visibility, unlike a chameleon in every way, so as to make important interventions such as his appearance, with Kufiya, on a serious late evening prime time news programme. Not bad for a pop star. Possibly a long time coming, but it is in the casting role of villain that the establishment doors were opened to some different ideas, high profile activism made possible – though there is an element of stunt about it, the attempt to draw attention to the Palestinian cause is sound – any publicity at all. A former punk drummer with reformed anarcho-global world music sensibilities coincides with entertainment values and programming requisites to enable political comment with a sharp edge.

### *The Bus as Chameleon*

What Nawaz does that is important is that he refuses to hide. He will not comply, does not merely want to pass incognito. He provokes honest recognition. He refuses anonymity as a strategy. Strange then that this strategy is associated with suicide bombing. The second part of this text addresses the bus and its bombers, that lurk – so we are led to fear – behind Nawaz. Terrorists hide amongst us without our knowledge – they are embedded, undercover, incognito, covert: then just



when you've ignored them for ages, a whole bunch come along all at once. Or so it seems, as the everyday profiling of Muslims as threatening others has reconfigured how we all move about the city. An old fashioned racism based on looks, surface and skin has risen to unquestioned prominence at the very time when discussion of race transmutes into talk of religion, ways of life, and civilizational virtues. We hear over and over in the mainstream press, and from the Government, talk of a clash of values, integration and of the need for community cohesion. This old >new< racism is blatant and its prejudice is clear. Policy by scare-mongering and tabloid popularity poll. There is also a theoretical parallel to this in the work of scholars who write today about ethnicity, identity and culture, and even in the work of those who ostensibly would offer up radical critiques of the way the war of terror has been prosecuted by those in power.

Of course the chameleon is targeted for special treatment. Just as profiling is designed to fill us with dread, the Black or Asian [terrorist] walks among us – this racist hysteria. A culture of anxiety and fear incites shivers and panic, we tingle with unease. Is it any surprise that everywhere I look I see intimations of this story – as I commute to work, railway station announcements warn that my belongings may be destroyed if I leave them; I am told not to hesitate to ask someone if an unattended bag is theirs; a general air of uncertainty pervades the tube; fellow passengers are almost too careful and too polite to each other; I suspect them of moving far away from anyone with even a hint of a beard and a backpack; and we all move away from those with Brazilian good looks (because we remember Jean Charles de Menezes, who was shot by police at Stockwell). I avert my eyes and read my newspaper (a free advertising sheet, with minimal – often sensationalist – news); and even at home I am not spared, a constant stream of bombings on screen. I am forced to turn away.

This squirm is strangely marked by a transportation theme, and an iconic one, which – as I will suggest – is inflected with an unexamined uncanny aspect. I want to (do I?) return to Tavistock Square. Turn to

the bus and look again, more closely. It will be easily accepted that the red double-decker bus is the globally acknowledged symbol of Lon-



Fig. 3: London 7.7.2005





Fig. 4: London 7.7.2005

don, you can buy trinket sized models of them in the souvenir stalls. As everyone knows, the bus became even more potently symbolic after the devastating attacks on the morning of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005. Indeed, we are continually forced to recall the horrific details: on that day three tube carriages and a number 30 Routemaster were destroyed, leaving 56 people dead.

A troubling ›event‹ it is, as many people note. Though another trouble is that I think we have been far too quick to decide there is nothing more to be discussed once our most prominent scholars have had their say. I want to read the sign on the side of the bus more carefully, not to confirm any conspiracy, nor to suggest that this bus more than any other incident in the war of terror should be singled out for special attention, but because much of the commentary on representation since the advent of the terror war has been, somewhat, lacking.

Another ›major event‹ (Derrida in BORRADORI 2003: 88) is immediately conjured here. It might be a commonplace to acknowledge that the twin towers have been so often represented that it is barely possible to see them now for fog and smoke. Those images replayed over and

over, watched aghast from the street and on all our screens. In a certain sense, and for some critics, the question of representation itself collapsed on that day in September, 2001. Of course everything has already been said about it, and nothing heard. It is as if the event dissolved into a background noise that is always there before us, but never seen. Here the chameleon becomes the architect, but the towers are silent; the lives erased then, and the many more lost since (and the billions in war credits to be measured against the stock market meltdown[s]) are also verbosely inarticulate. Both always in view and strangely obscured. The ›terrorists‹ and those who were intent on the ›war on terror‹ had a common interest in a high televisual visibility which had the images say what they wanted them to say, and say nothing at all (so it seems). Derrida calls this a ›pervertability‹ of the image (in BORRADORI 2003: 109).

The real face of terror for me is a de-linking of cause and effect in relation to such incidents as the bombing of that particular London bus: it is what I will call a chameleon-like transportation mutation and a blindness of representation. It is my argument that as commentary turns to religion or culture, any critical response to the scene of the ripped open vehicle becomes somehow silenced, and that we become blind to what this image means. Think: what can we see here? I should point out that the intentional metaphoric slant I am invoking here appropriates the terms used by Susan Buck-Morss and Slavoj Žižek in books that address issues of terror and violence. Along with Alain Badiou, they refer to such atrocities, and to the actions of suicide bombers, as mute, blind, silent and disconnected. We all seem complicit in our failure of vision. This was also the perverse refrain of former British Prime Minister Blair in defending British foreign policy in the wake of the London bombings (there was no link between last week's bombings in London and the Iraq war, 25 July 2005 BBC).<sup>216</sup>

In his 2008 book *Violence*, Žižek calls terrorist attacks and suicide bombings a ›counter violence‹ that is a ›blind *passage a l'acte*‹ and an ›implicit admission of impotence‹ (ŽIŽEK 2008: 69). I find this not dissimilar to how Badiou, writing of September 11, 2001, starts his essay



on ›Philosophy and the War on Terror‹ by saying ›It was an enormous murder, lengthily premeditated, and yet silent. No one claimed responsibility‹ (BADIOU 2006: 15). Susan Buck-Morss, in her book *Thinking Past Terror*, offers ›the destruction of September 11 was a mute act. The attackers perished without making demands [...]. They left no note behind [...]. A mute act‹ (BUCK-MORSS 2003: 23). It should be said she qualifies this with a question ›Or did they?‹, but the suggestion of an absent verbal – mute – message is something we should attend to, listen closely, consider again, and not just with our eyes scanning for evidence (hint: on the side of the bus, see inset), but with our ears and minds as well. In a similar tone, we might pass over the curiosity that Žižek chooses the infirmities of blindness and impotence to characterise the terrorist suicide bomber, as if the twin towers of September 11, 2001 in New York indicated a scene of masturbation (too much and you lose your sight) and castration (impotence, symbolic castration of the towers, mummy daddy, the old psychoanalytic staples are invoked, later it will be called a parallax). The task of a critical commentary is not just to stop and stare, but it is also not just a matter of listing ever more details on the symptomatic eventuality that has to be pathologized via fables and pantomime in order to be dismissed.

The point is that these theorists all agree on an absence of meaning that sets these acts apart. Badiou and Žižek's claims about suicide bombings recall earlier comments by Buck-Morss on New York, where she suggests that the ›staging of violence as a global spectacle separates September 11 from previous acts of terror‹ and, as we should underscore, all three dwell upon the absence of message: ›They left no note behind ... Or did they?‹ (BUCK-MORSS 2003: 23-4). More uncompromising and perhaps mischievous, Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, presents the event in his own peculiarly Lacanian perspective:

»The spectacular explosion of the WTC towers was not simply a symbolic act (in the sense of an act whose aim is to ›deliver a message‹); it was primarily an explosion of lethal *jouissance*, a perverse act of making oneself the instrument of the big Other's *jouissance*« (ŽIŽEK 2002: 141).

I for one am not satisfied with this. The task of a critical commentary is not just to stop and stare. It is also not just a matter of listing ever more details of the symptomatic eventuality that has to be pathologized in order to be dismissed. We might do more than read surfaces if we look closely at one such revealing detail, that has, curiously, been thus far ignored.

Echoing, with hindsight, the picture of Aki Nawaz in *The Guardian*, the scene of the July 7<sup>th</sup> tragedy is captured in widely circulated images of the wrecked bus in Tavistock Square, taken by US based photo-journalist Mathew Rosenberg. One of his pictures, appearing in most newspapers the next day, showed the bus from a 45% frontal angle with a disturbingly ironic film advertising placard visible on its side. This was for the film *The Descent*, due to be released the next day (2005 dir. Neil Marshall). *The Descent* was a schlock horror-thriller about inhuman monsters in a cave visited by a group of friends who become lost and are subsequently killed off one by one. The cave is the least of the coincidences however, as Londoners read reports and looked at grainy mobile phone video footage from the dark underground. Could we even begin to understand this horror? And were we ready to absorb the irony that the portion of the film placard left on the side of the bus after the explosion clearly displayed a message for us all. Tangled metal and stunned commuters foregrounded by a torn but still legible placard. It says: ›Outright Terror, Bold and Brilliant – total film‹.

Hasib Mir Hussain was said to be the bus bomber (generally accepted as fact, although questioned by bus passenger and witness Daniel Obachike in his web book *The Fourth Bomb*).<sup>217</sup> Hussain detonated his bomb some 50 minutes after the three tube explosions. Speculation was that, having planned to also blow up a tube carriage, he had lost his nerve and was fleeing the scene, perhaps accidentally setting his bomb off while trying to diffuse it (there were reports of him fiddling with his rucksack). Because the bomber is dead, it is not possible to ascertain whether Hussain had intentionally targeted this particular bus. But some seem ready to decide, for example, my sociologist colleague



Victor Seidler says the Tavistock Square bus bombing was ›unplanned‹ (SEIDLER 2007: 10). Whatever the case about the bus – and I tend to think it is a gory coincidence – the thoughts and motives of a suicide bomber are never readily available even where the bombers leave messages and – in the case of Hussain's co-conspirator, Mohammed Sidique Khan – bequeath us justificatory ›confessional‹ videos to be broadcast after the event. We have however to analyse these with something more than anxious fear. The interpretive work of reading the sign on the bus means refusing the broad brush that paints these bombers as merely mute and blind, even as we put names and faces to them – the very gesture which allows fear to proliferate. To profile these bombers as chameleons, as dangerous infiltrators who go incognito amongst us, but do so with a silent and inscrutable face, who do silence as threat, is to enable a double-play that only confirms the ›bold and beautiful‹ success of this terror, this atrocity.

Of course we can only watch those images for so long. Indeed, the image from the side of the bus seems actually to have been erased. We no longer see the image on screen, which confirms it was not ›Total Film‹, despite the terrible irony, and it looks as if we cannot bear to discuss this much at all. Instead, we have a different mode of commentary, in which – I want to note this as irony too – we see a lot more Muslims on the news than ever before. Bombers Hussain and Khan are off-screen, but the frequent presence of Muslim community leaders as ›spokesmen‹ on British television news talkback is a part of a larger project, in part orchestrated by Government and its agencies (police, media) to manage the postcolonial nation in a context of war. Carefully selected ›moderate Muslims‹ must be identified, shaped and disciplined into a discursive non-fighting force – a class of persons of colour, compliant in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect (*pace* Macaulay's minute) – while ›extremist‹, outspoken or otherwise non-compliant figures serve as characters fit for demonization, scaremongering and foreign policy justification. The good cop bad cop scenario is transmuted here into a management of appear-

ances – the good community leader is set against the aggressive, often ridiculed, aberrant complainant. Brown skins are offered on screen in dual roles. The Kufiya check and the TV test pattern are both static. Scratch the surface of appearance and what we have is a struggle over national identity, a contested arena of civil freedoms and a lost opportunity for real debate.

That the debate scenario of televisual news is a colour-coded fashion show is counterfactually reinforced by the continued parade of white models, white presenters, white authority – but I am no longer persuaded that the mere fact of having brown faces on television is a step towards equality. Visibility must mean something more – such that while we might now insist the skin tone of the speaker matters not so much as the speakers' allegiance or not to a set of ideas, the degree to which those ideas may more or less conform to a white supremacist agenda is itself reinforced again by skin. Rather than the contours of distraction and anxiety, the theoretical arabesques about *jouissance*, or of mute and blind violence, a louder and wide-eyed debate must be had now. Much has already been said, but the meaning is obscured and if we refuse to read the signs before our eyes. I think this is a part of a general obfuscation, a general avoidance: chameleon thinking, self-deceit. There are some that talk about war-on-terror fatigue – we are no longer capable of paying attention to the impact of this war on our day to day lives – but I think it amounts to a strangely deflected reaction to the suspicions that we know are everywhere present. In full face profile, the upfront discussion we need about everyday racism on screen and on the buses might then filter through our convoluted anxieties and point towards better understandings, and a more robust defence of those under attack. It is unacceptable to see brown faces accused and detained, having to deny wrongdoing over and over (as was 23 year old ›lyrical terrorist‹ Samina Malik, as well as so many other ›suspects‹). This war of terror as it plays out in the city means Muslims are subject to stop and search, special investigations, harassment and inconvenience, train stations and airports are



an ordeal, suspicious looks are just a step away from violent attack and a rendition flight to Guantanamo. The face of racism renewed is that Muslims today are required to ›get their house in order‹, or they must ›leave‹: a spurious double play that sets a superficial tone for media commentary and excludes deeper perspectives. We cannot remain mute nor turn away blind to a racism that wreaks such pervasive destruction upon us all.

I feel any adequate scholarship here is not a matter of the critiquing of essences or complaints about reductions and omissions or deceptions as such, but of questioning and challenging what passes for involvement and engagement in reportage and scholarship, and enacting strategies for change and liberation than do more than add local colour. It is not that Žižek's or Buck-Morss's moves are irrelevant, but that for me, and for what I clumsily feel is more necessary, a presentation of theoretical or ethical erudition is less urgent than the question of adequacy. What would be adequate – theoretically, organizationally, politically – to win with regard to anti-racism, anti-capitalism? Against war, what engagement do we need? This outrageous, quixotic, romantic disposition... but this too is an odd move, accusing engaged theorists with obscurantism and non-committal is ›smugly exaggerated [...] [and] [...] reactionary« (ADORNO [1966] 1973: 35). Aki Nawaz leads the way, Free Gaza is crushed. The Spirit of Humanity labours off-shore.

### References

- ADORNO, T.: *Negative Dialectics*. London [Continuum] (1966) 1973  
 BACK, L.: *The Art of Listening*. London [Berg] 2007  
 BADIOU, A.: *Polemics*. London [Verso] 2006  
 BUCK-MORSS, S.: *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*. London [Verso] 2003  
 DERRIDA, J. IN: BORRADORI, G.: *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues*

*with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago [University of Chicago Press] 2003

- HEBDIGE, D.: *Hiding in the Light*. London [Routledge] 1988  
 HUTNYK, J.: *Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry*. London [Pluto] 2000  
 SEIDLER, V. J.: *Urban Fears and Global Terrors*. London [Routledge] 2007  
 SHARMA, S.; J. HUTNYK; A. SHARMA (eds.): *Dis-orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*. London [Zed books] 1996  
 ŽIŽEK, S.: *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London [Verso] 2002  
 ŽIŽEK, S.: *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London [Verso] 2008  
 ŽIŽEK, S.: *Violence*. London [Profile Books] 2008

### Figures

- Fig. 1: Aki Nawaz in 1996 © Matt Bright, Nation Records  
 Fig. 2: Aki Nawaz in 2006 © Martin Godwin, *The Guardian* 2006  
 Fig. 3: London 7.7.2005 © Mathew Rosenberg 2005  
 Fig. 4: London 7.7.2005 © the author



- 214 <http://swedenburg.blogspot.com/2007/10/this-report-is-from-al-ahram-weekly-26.html> [accessed January 15 2009].
- 215 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1807542,00.html> [accessed 24 March 2008].
- 216 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/3681938.stm> [accessed 24 March 2008].
- 217 <http://daniel77witness.blogspot.com/> [accessed 24 march 2008].
- 218 Marx's text begins with the following words (which reference his own *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*): »The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an ›immense collection of commodities‹; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form« (MARX 1967: 35).
- 219 See for example this (incomplete) list of the détournements employed in *The Society of the Spectacle*: <http://www.notbored.org/SOTS-detournements.html>
- 220 The Situationist International was a group of artists, theorists and activists that existed between 1957 and 1972. The group emerged from the milieu of avant-garde art and culture, but its stated aim of uniting art and life entailed a theoretical output that was chiefly concerned with the relation between capitalism and subjectivity, and with the possibilities for revolutionary social change. Debord was the central figure within the group, and its principal theorist.
- 221 The most widely recognised examples of the technique are perhaps the s.i.'s now iconic subverted comic strips.
- 222 One can perhaps detect a similar concern in some of Marx's own writings. For example, Marx writes in *Capital*: »... In order that we may treat them in their proper context, many other points relevant here have also been relegated to the third volume. The particular course taken by our analysis forces this tearing apart of the object under investigation; this corresponds also to the spirit of capitalist production« (MARX 1990: 442f.).
- 223 Cravan was another of Debord's great heroes, alongside Ducasse. His life and general demeanour can be seen to embody Dada's spirit; a poet and boxer who travelled across Europe and America with scant regard for territorial boundaries (or indeed for authentic passports), Cravan's ›lectures‹ and performances were unpredictable affairs. On this particular occasion mentioned above he drew a full house to watch his supposed suicide; wearing only a jockstrap (›for the benefit of the ladies‹), drinking a bottle of absinthe and with his balls draped across the table he drunkenly harangued the audience for having made a social event of death (HALE 2005: 20).
- 224 To quote Bruce Baugh, »the Surrealists want negation, but without limits; Sartre wants negation, but without totality; Derrida and Bataille want negativity, but not its recuperation in a positive result« (BAUGH 2003: 1).