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TERRORIST STILL-LIFE

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This essay argues that as Santosh Sivan's 1998 film Theeviravaathi (The Terrorist) *is haunted by the spectre of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, it materially reproduces the still image of his assassin's body, which circulated in the Indian media, through the use of extended close-ups of the near-motionless female main character, the eponymous terrorist. Evoking the use of penal and ethnological photography by British colonial authorities in India, this curious stilling of the motion picture aims to quiet anxieties about unruly and fugitive figures of violence. The photographic image of the face, in this context, becomes the terms of identifiability and the limits of interiority. At the same time, however, the cinematic containment of the terrorist body is a decapitation that begs precisely the questions of intent, of agency, and of humanness that form was intended to evade. Now read from the perspective of a post-9/11 world and the global War on Terror, it becomes clear that this mode of image capture worked in service of apprehension; today, image capture of the terrorist still-life works in service of obliteration.*

On 21 May 1991, at a campaign stop in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was greeted, as was the custom, by a crowd of young women with flower garlands. Each in turn would come

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forward to place the flowers around his neck and stoop to take the dust from his feet. A gesture mimetically refiguring the scene of marital garland exchange, this ritual was grotesquely interrupted on this day as one of the young women who, having garlanded Gandhi, detonated a bomb strapped to her waist when she bent to touch his feet in ostensive respect. By setting off the bomb, she killed herself, Gandhi, and a dozen others. In the days, weeks, months, and years following the assassination, the initial investigation and subsequent conspiracy trial in 1998 struggled to account adequately for the who and why of the assassination. While authorities considered the possibility that it might have been the work of either Sikh or Kashmiri militants, the likeliest explanation was the local one: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). From 1983 to 1986, the Indian government had provided financial and military support to the LTTE and other Tamil separatist groups in the Sri Lankan civil war. Ethnolinguistic affinities between the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the liberation movement across the Palk Strait were robust, even and especially after India withdrew its support in 1987 and Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) were sent in to disarm the LTTE. Additionally, Tamil Nadu was home to several LTTE training camps. Moreover, Gandhi's assassination bore the material hallmarks of the LTTE, which had popularized the use of explosive belts and female suicide bombers.

In order to confirm these suspicions, authorities circulated an image from the blast site: a black-and-white photograph of the sole unclaimed body from the bombing site, believed to belong to the suicide bomber. Indian and foreign news outlets were quick to catalog the "complexion and features" of the corpse that were to identify it as Tamil (Gupta 1991; Iyengar 1991; Weinraub 1991). Drawing on the popularized racial discourse of Dravidian otherness, these accounts pointed to the dark skin, coarse curly hair, and broad facial features of the corpse as phenotypic proof that the suicide bomber had been Tamil and thus a member of the LTTE.[1] Its abdomen missing, the head and the limbs of this corpse haunted the national imagination as the remains of an instrument of death. Its face, remarkably unscathed by the bomb blast that sheared it off the majority of the skull, became subject to criminal and public scrutiny; the image of decapitation was further severed in the cropped photographs that featured only the corpse's face.

This photographic image of the alleged assassin's body both solicited information and sought to offer a spectacular epistemological compensation. While authorities asked the public to come forward with tips on the identity of the body, the proliferation of the image of the body acted as its own form of capture. The disruptive force of the act – killing the once and potentially future sovereign – was mitigated by the technological stilling and containment of the body in the public view. By the time she was identified as 20-year-old Thenmozhi Rajaratam, alias Dhanu, her dismembered body and flattened visage were nearly as familiar an image as that of Gandhi himself.

1 The archegenetic roots of this discourse emerge particularly sharply during the 1998 conspiracy trial in which forensic scientists evoke nineteenth-century phrenology and craniometry in their descriptions of constructing skull and facial molds of the bomber and other LTTE members killed at the site.

Seven years after Gandhi's death and the circulation of that photographic image, the stilled sight was cinematically resurrected, reanimated in service of a new capture. Santosh Sivan's Tamil-language film *Theeviravaathi* (*The Terrorist*), filmed and released during the conspiracy trial, follows a young woman – 19-year-old Malli, played by the arresting Ayesha Dhakar – as she prepares to undertake a suicide attack on an unnamed politician, only ever referred to in the film as the VIP. Though neither Malli's target nor her cause is named, the film conjures the spectre of Gandhi's assassination and his assassin. Caught in a frame of extended close-ups, Malli is eerily still for much of the film. Evoking the use of photography by British colonial authorities in India, this curious freezing of the motion picture aims to quiet anxieties about unruly and fugitive figures of violence. Nicholas Dirks writes of the use of ethnographic photographs to produce recognizable objects of colonial governance that,

> For colonial ethnography, the colonized subject was first and foremost a body, to be known and controlled through the measurement and interpretation of physical subjects organized in categories by caste and gender. In all this attention to the body, there was little attention in the subjectivity, will, or agency of the colonial subjects. (2001, 193)

Photographic images of the face, in this context, become the terms of identifiability and the limits of interiority. Postcolonial India, faced with the death of a sovereign, also sought to identify the type of Gandhi's killer. Dhanu was flattened into an ethnographic form such that the causality of Gandhi's death no longer depended on her individuality, will, agency, or rationale. Malli, like Dhanu, is made through the stilled image the vehicle of an action, rather than its actant.

From the vantage of our post-9/11 world, however, both Dhanu and Malli's stilled forms appear as anomaly – disruptive faces of a concept that has for nearly two decades now been the object of global war. Today, terror has new life, but no face. Image capture, for the British Empire in India and its postcolonial legacy, was a part of a broad biometric apparatus of governance that sought to catalog and rationalize its subjects. It was a project of apprehension. It has become, in the contemporary moment, a project of obliteration. Captured, the radical Islamic militant who has become at once exemplar and limit-case of terrorist as concept is disappeared from sight. Rendered extraordinarily. Photographs of the detainees at Abu Ghraib, whose hooded, naked, brutalized bodies splayed across the Internet, are the triumph of an imperial image capture of another order. A new world order – where political sentiments of armed militancy like that of the LTTE, the Sandanistas, the IRA, and the Indian Maoists – no longer constitute the terms of terror. This is not to say that local and national conflicts and

insurgencies have disappeared post-9/11. Rather, America's War on Terror has cohered as an imperial formation in and of itself. Talal Asad (2010) calls the Euro-American project against terror a "humanitarian military action", in which the duty to protect and the right to kill are no longer limited to national subjects. In this way, compelling into shared action other state actors – like India, which as America's strategic partner on the subcontinent and itself conducting an imperial experiment of sorts, has found its own local idiom for this globally circulating discourse – a new empire made of and for terror has been inaugurated.

Radicalism, now so thoroughly fused to religious iconography in its public deployment, has been shorn of political and indeed apprehendable logics. When terrorists attack "*our* way of life", their goal figured as destruction rather than the creative discourse of revolutionary violence, the attendant question of why someone might choose to take their own life alongside those of others garbles into unintelligibility.[2] The answer is no longer embedded in the question. Reason has been replaced by religion; ideology replaced by pathology.[3] In turn, the time of those lives and their deaths comes to be mapped onto an anachronic cosmology. The time of the political commitment is ill-fitted to the timelessness of afterlife reward. To look back on Sivan's 1998 film and its photographic forebears now is to historicize the time of that imperial stilling and to rethink the body of terror and its orientation towards death within this new imperial regime as well.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes of the death drive that,

> If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that "the aim of all life is death" and, looking backwards, that "*inanimate things existed before living ones*". (1975, 45–46)

Our lives are death-bound: directionally and temporally oriented towards what Freud thermodynamically describes as a state of zero excitation, becoming inorganic once more. Inanimation precedes animation: death constitutes the limits of life. In this essay I suggest we reorient this understanding of death-boundedness beyond the directional to an ontological death-boundedness. The eponymous female terrorist, the suicide bomber-to-be, in the film is made of and for death. She is a remainder of life in the form of one who is alive-to-die. As an instrument of death – her own and that of her target – she is doubly, continuously, and proleptically annihilated. Killer and killed. As an echo of previous twinned death, the terrorist of the film is insistently stilled even as she moves towards the end of her life and that of her target. The moving images of the film come to be sutured to a prior event of death and its photographic remnants. *The Terrorist* thus diverts the logic of the Freudian death instinct and its promised trajectory from animation to inanimation by representing a figure whose

2 Scott (2009) argues that, post-9/11, "terrorism continues to threaten nation-states, but it also threatens to undermine the smooth functioning of markets and the global north's 'way of life,' itself defined in increasingly distinctive ways that rely less upon citizen identification with the nation-state and more upon one's status as a consumer in a post-Fordist economy" (580).

3 Baudrillard (2001) writes of the logics unleashed by the 9/11 attacks, "This is terror against terror – there is no longer any ideology behind it" (9). As a scene of epistemic rupture, 9/11 seems to have altered the very terms by which violence and terrorism can be accounted.

very life, its animatory force, moves not just back towards its still origins but is constituted by death as its singular principle and force. This terrorist is rendered corpsely, still-life though always yet dead.

A human bomb

Among the things found at the site of Gandhi's assassination was a camera – later determined to belong to a LTTE member tasked with recording the attack – the photographs of which recorded the moments leading up to, and including the instant of, the explosion. While the image of Dhanu's corpse was circulated in black and white, its reproduction iteratively pushing Dhanu outside of the shape and dimension of humanness, the photographic series developed from the camera is vividly coloured, the final shot the near-white red of the blast itself. Those images, which include one of Dhanu waiting with other young women for Gandhi to arrive and two in which Dhanu and Gandhi share a frame, intimate what will come to be of them both.

The suicide attack vividly recalled to the public imagination a prior moment of shared national and familial trauma from less than a decade before: the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi's mother, Indira Gandhi, then prime minister, in 1984. The elder Gandhi was shot at close range by her own bodyguards in apparent retaliation for the ordered military attack on the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, which killed nearly five hundred civilians. Her older son Sanjay's death three years earlier in a plane accident elicited ominous comparisons of tragic political dynastism between the Gandhis and the Kennedys. When Rajiv Gandhi took over the mantle of the Congress Party, led before him by his mother and before that by his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, he himself marked his death as a foregone conclusion. His widow Sonia Gandhi, who would lead the Congress Party after his death, recalled their conversation in a hospital waiting room the day of Indira Gandhi's assassination:

> I begged him not to let them do this. I pleaded with him, with others around him, too. He would be killed as well. He held my hands, hugged me, tried to soothe my desperation. He had no choice, he said, he would be killed anyway. (Ramchandra 2012, 197–198)

Thanatos sat lightly on Rajiv Gandhi's shoulders in this moment, prophetically whispering the inevitability of his sudden, violent death.[4] Indeed, Gandhi's death seems to have been so stridently foretold that the CIA, in 1986, produced a confidential memo entitled "India After Rajiv", outlining the potential outcomes of a Gandhi assassination – of which there was "an even chance" (CIA 1986, iii). The Gandhi name, not insignificantly evocative of Mohandas K. Gandhi (no relation, but also assassinated at close range),

4 Though many scholars and practitioners have used Thanatos to describe Freud's notion of the death-drive, he himself

never uses the term. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* he uses "Eros" to describe the instinct towards life and survival and *Todestrieb* for the death-drive. Thanatos appears first in the work of Wilhelm Stekel, as a complementary allusion to Eros.

was and remains a metonym of the postcolonial Indian state, its familial genealogy simultaneously a national political genealogy. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the repeated scene of violent death foretold and forewarned, is a scene, too, of the national death-drive.

It is not only the individual, notable, metonymic death that is repeated in Rajiv Gandhi's death but also the collectivized, nationalized, and thus sanctified death-drive that unleashed martial law and unbridled military brutality in Punjab, in Tamil Nadu, in Assam, in Kashmir, in the name of national security and under the guise of the Indian "Peace Keeping" Forces. *Todestrieb* turned outward in order to cohere and coalesce that which is the apparent guardian of civilization itself: the state. These sutured violences refuse to consign the individual to morality and the national to politics. They are death-bound to one another. Even as the colour photos depict Gandhi in life, he is never singular. His body is perpetually in contact with, bound to, the bodies around him, including those that will end his life. We might see these images as the preface to the ways in which, in taking Gandhi's life with her own, Dhanu fuses herself to Gandhi's body. The black-and-white photo of her corpse that becomes symbolic of her act and her identity depicts the human body broken apart but hints of a new body that will be made. The severed head and limbs come to constitute the limits and possibilities of the terrorist form: fragmented, decapitated. But in detonating herself as bomb, Dhanu created a new body of death. The explosion that separated her face from the back of her head and eviscerated her trunk took with it the front of Rajiv Gandhi's face as it blew his skull off his shattered midsection. Gandhi and his assassin's fragmented forms supplement one another, bound by the moment of shared death into a single organ-less organism.

If Dhanu will come to be identified and reproduced in the public imagination by the image of her face, Gandhi will be identified and reproduced by the bright-white Lotto sneakers on his feet. The head, the most sacred part of the human body in the Hindu mythos, and the feet, the basest part but also that to which she stooped to press her forehead in a performance of respect, come to be that by which terrorist and victim are identified. Terrorist head, sovereign feet. Gandhi's remains were thereafter shrouded from view by the image of his corpse, pieced together and embalmed before its return to Delhi, blanketed by masses of flower garlands. The flowers Dhanu placed around his neck before the explosion themselves seem to multiply in the performance of national mourning of his death. Indeed, the act of garlanding binds not just Dhanu to her target but also to the nation-state of which Gandhi was once again intended to be head, to a population that condemned her act and celebrated his life, to the demonstrations of public mourning and acknowledged death. The flower garland, *mala*, occupies a particularly forceful and prominent symbolic place in South Asian Hindu practices. Garlands exchanged between bride and groom in lieu of rings at a wedding reappear

in the daily worship of deity idols, refreshed regularly atop household photographs of deceased loved ones, sanctifying the necks of corpses on their way to the pyre. The *mala* consecrates the touch of flower to flesh, to clay, to paper, to cadaver. To garland is to recognize and inscribe an object by its face, whether remains or image, and to bind it to an act of worship through ritual. It is also itself a mark, most visible perhaps in the *vadhyamala*, the garland placed around the neck of one condemned to execution. When Dhanu garlanded Gandhi before the denotation, she sealed herself and her act of self-annihilation to him and slaughter to sacrifice. The explosion scattered body parts outwards in shreds and fragments, and simultaneously fused Dhanu and Gandhi, as remains and metonyms, in a curiously shared project of national human-making and memorializing (Figures 1 and 2).

Side by side, their corpsely images are a deathly conjoinment: his thronged by bodies in collective grief while physical remains are buried under symbols of his sanctification; hers alone in the frame of a stark white background, isolated from the touch of those who might grieve her loss. His body was cremated on the banks of the holy Ganges, at the same pyre at which he performed the funeral rituals for his assassinated mother, and then its ashes were scattered across the expanse of India by plane and train, like his mother's and grandfather's before him. Even his remains bore the mark of the sovereign as they limned the boundaries of the nation-state for which he and his surname were referent. Her remains would not be cremated, both out of ostensible respect for her Buddhist faith and so that her skull might be disinterred at a later date if needed. Dhanu's body was preserved in formaldehyde as evidence, officials promising its burial once her identity had been confirmed. That promise, it should be mentioned, seems never to have come to pass, as rumours suggest her remains still hang in suspended inanimation at a CID lab in Chennai to this day ("Suspect Body Preserved" 1991; Swamy 2000, 5). Gandhi's remains are incorporated into the body of the nation-state as the remains of his grievability, while the disposal of Dhanu's is markedly unritualized, unsanctified, unnationalized.

In fact, Dhanu's face became a prosecutory death mask in 1998, when forensic scientists reconstructed it and her skull as evidence of LTTE involvement in the assassination and a demonstration of the process by which she was identified. There, the state used her face, now rendered three-dimensionally in clay out of its two-dimensional form as remnant and photograph, to reverse the fragmenting process by which she was availed to them. This new face, this new head, is not that of the corpse in the photograph. This face of terror, singular and non-statist, becomes the face of state control and legality. The 1998 trial, as it built a new body of terror to be posthumously punished, leaned upon the original image from 1991 of the corpse in pieces and that which those pieces promise, the bomb which fragmented her and Gandhi both.

Figure 1 "Suspect Killer's Spectacles Found," ***The Times of India*****, 26 May 1991.**

Even before she was given a name, Dhanu has a mechanistic function. When she came to be identified by name, that function (bomb) remained insistently sutured to her in the ghostly absence of her torso to which it was bound, as accounts uniformly and consistently come to call her "Dhanu, the Human Bomb". But what is a human bomb? Is it human or machine? Is it cyborg – an integrated woman–machine system? Can a human bomb be alive, can it die? The posthumous renaming of Gandhi's assassin by the terms of a single name and machine produces a disjunctive measure of iconic familiarity and inhumanity that pushes against and in protest of the limits of biological life. This naming also freezes the question

Figure 2 **"Nation Mourns Rajiv,"** ***The Times of India*****, 23 May 1991.**

of her rationale; rumours that she had been raped by the IPKF are indexed by her affiliation rather than by her individuality. The circulation of still images of Dhanu suggests that the terrorist might have a relationship to death that is about being made of death, rather than just oriented towards it. Death-boundedness of a different order – always already constituted in and by death: the terrorist still-life. The still image is at once the particular remains of the woman accused of denoting herself as bomb and the proof of the possibility of such an act.

Necromancing the terrorist

In an essay following 9/11, Gayatri Spivak suggests the word "terrorism" is an abstraction (2004). It is a capacious formation designed to be an alibi for imperialism, for the state mandate of intervention and militancy. Terrorism is a thing without a body. The "terrorist", then, is the affectation of terror given body; *embodied*, the transubstantiative figuration of the abstract into the object. In Sivan's film, the body of that affect summons the historical image of a body that preceded it; a body in fragments produces the stillborn conditions of possibility for its future instantiation. The animated image of the film is haunted by the still image of Dhanu's dismembered corpse.

Malli, ostensibly the eponymous terrorist, appears in the film almost entirely in extended close-up, proleptically decapitated, in fragments. In the opening scene, she is first shown with her face covered while she kills a comrade who has been accused of betraying the cadre. We see her, eyes framed in extreme close-up, from the perspective of the traitor-to-be-killed. We are apprized of his death by the splatter of blood on her already rain-soaked red face covering.

She is cinematically born through the death of another, incarnating herself as the DVD copy promises "a natural born killer". This ontological certainty of her monstrosity gives form to the necromanced and necrotic body of terror. The image of Malli as fragment, as decapitated head, repeats throughout the film. Close-up merges the violence of actual bodily fragmentation with the scopophilic/fetishistic fragmentation of the cinematic gaze, at once violent and erotic. Laura Mulvey argues of the close-up: "Within the narrative structure, femininity and sexual spectacle tend to condense, exaggerating the cinema's (in Godard's terms) specific condensation between the beauty of woman, the close-up, and the stasis of spectacle as opposed to the movement of action" (1996, 45). Close-ups, for Mulvey, draw the viewer into intimate proximity with the female face, hinting at an epistemological and sexual mastery. But in the case of Malli, though her beauty is undeniable and the film plays with cinematic expectations of seduction, she is determinedly unsexualized. Even the scene in which she becomes pregnant is one of death, an insistent deromanticization of the sexual encounter. We never witness Malli engaged in any explicit sexual contact with the unnamed young man, a comrade she has saved during a raid in which his entire camp is wiped out. Instead, the orgasmic release of the scene comes from the moment at which Malli witnesses his death. Their encounter, shot in the half-light of the jungle, is necrophilic because both of their deaths are foretold. It is sex between two figures of death, from whom we must speculate only more death might be born.

The moving image of Sivan's film, Malli's face frozen in frame, is haunted by that earlier photograph of Dhanu, the human bomb, the still image of the terrorist corpse, of her severed head, her fragmented form. In reimaging the terms by which Gandhi's assassination is made possible – how a woman might come to kill herself and another in the name of a cause – the film recirculates the image of the fragmented female corpse as terrorist subject, rendering her doubly inhuman: ghost and monstrosity, remnant and reminder. It mimetically constructs a kinship between female bodies in fragments, across media, across space: the definite article of the film's title coalesces within it those fragments into a single female terrorist body always already dead. Or, more precisely, terrorist-stilled, suspended in inanimation, held in place by the very force and promise of death.

The term *terrorist still-life* in this essay seeks to conjure the imagistic remains of Dhanu's photograph circulated in newspapers, the unblinking

stare of Malli's face in frame. But the term is also bound to the generic and aesthetic expectations of a technology of representation that precedes both film and still image: still-life painting. Still-life is suspended in inanimation by the name, *nature morte*, and the promise of the natural world stilled by the force of death. Inside the frame of the seventeenth-century still-life, we catch glimpses of that which was life and whose animatory force has receded to that state of zero excitation: skulls, carcasses, cadavers. Even when the apparently living human figure finds its way into the scene, the genre of the portrait appears as refuge for the representation of liveness. This is by no means a stable or often compelling distinction that turns less on the population of the painting and more on its ability to represent some quality by which we recognize what makes a human alive. Emil Carlsen writes: "There is no essential difference between a still-life and a portrait. Up to a certain point a portrait is a still-life. Then there must be something added – personality, life" (Bye 1921, 17). To think then of Malli, the unmoving close-ups which make up her cinematic existence, as still-life is to engage precisely the question of what constitutes her aliveness, her humanness, her personhood. It is also a matter of grammar. As still-life, Malli is for the entirety of the film a death to come. It is a transitional condition, the inevitability of her death that propels her forward.

Malli is both instrument and object of death, chosen from within the ranks of the female cadre to carry out this suicide attack on the VIP by virtue of her exceptionality and her disposability. In one scene, shot in half-shadow, an almost indistinguishable litany of young women – between the ages of seventeen and twenty – introduce themselves to the camera and an unseen judge: offering name, age, and their *curriculum vitae* of revolutionary credibility. This is a casting call for a suicide mission. The perspective of the camera is the perspective of the judge. The audience is made a party to, complicit in, the selecting and constructing of the terrorist. The intimacy of the interrogation/interview is interrupted by its repetition. They each repeat their willingness, their desire, to undertake the attack. Each offers something that they have sacrificed for the cause – an arm, two years in prison, capture – as proof of their commitment. Only Malli offers success as proof instead: she says, "Thirty missions, all successful". This is an assertion without subject – there is no "I" in her action, self-promotion without the self. Her female comrades are rendered fallible in comparison, nearly humanized by their loss, their limits, their apparent physiological or psychological attachment to a thing that no longer exists. Malli, however, is exempt from this humanization. Her missions, "all successful", are the subject of the sentence; she is merely their instrument.

After being chosen to undertake the attack, Malli is offered the chance to meet the Leader, the nameless and faceless voice that authorizes the violence of which she will be the agent. Malli's cinematic decapitation in close-up here

is curiously offered as the inversion of that of the Leader. We never see his face, but as they pose together for a photograph, Malli's head and shoulders come to rest in the centre of his decapitated torso, a grotesque reassemblage of fragmented body parts into a single (if momentary) symbiotic organism.

We might recall here the missing torso of Dhanu – the filled emptiness of space in that still image between severed head and limbs, the comingling of her fragments with those of her target. Malli is to be the face of this attack, the last that the VIP will see, that which might be circulated in still-photograph close-up for indentification and memorialization. The anonymous and unmarked Leader comes to be the stabilizing trunk, puppeting hands, resonating voice. Indeed, Malli says less than two hundred words over the course of the entire film. Her silence, coupled with the film's extended close-ups of her unblinking eyes, eerily decelerates her into a still image, a photographic insertion within the cinematic frame. The rapid-fire sound of the camera shutter echoes the sound of machine-gun fire in the earlier scene and recalls the images recovered from the Gandhi blast site. Shutter speed and sound, like the puncture of gunfire and the bomb explosion, stills movement and life both.

In the meeting with the Leader, though Malli does not speak, her still form becomes animated and automated by the proximity to his presence through a necromantic intimacy. Necromancy, as a mode and vehicle of divination, depends on an epistemological intimacy with death, a desire to make the dead speak to that which has not yet come to be. The Leader says to Malli, "When I look at you, I know we have an infallible weapon. You're supreme … a thinking bomb". The thinking bomb, like Dhanu, the human bomb, is the inhuman machine of human death, armed with explosives and cognition. She is a bomb with a head. Harnessing of the terrorist corpse into action constructs futurity out of that deathly life. Necromantically, Malli is made to speak of a future that might come to be out of her annihilation.

In the days leading up to her planned attack, she is reminded over and over again by her handlers that her sacrifice will inspire and benefit future generations. The end of her biological life, and that of the VIP, will produce the ideological conditions of possibility for an imagined future community, the possessive grammar of which, "*our* future generations", Malli is only contingently a part. This is an exchange of mortality and potentiality to which Malli shows little resistance for the first half of the film, as she travels out of the jungle training camps which are the breeding ground of these death-bound subjects, is ferried across a Styx-like river, and is deposited at a small farm where she is ordered to wait in preparation for the assassination. The spatial break in the film here also makes possible its major narrative shift: upon arriving at the farm, under the guise of a student conducting agricultural research, Malli is informed by the farmer, her host, that she is pregnant – or, as he puts it, "There is life in you". Thus, she becomes a vessel for a very different kind of "future" life.

Abjection, or life infecting death

The critical reception of the film, particularly following its 1999 North American release under the patronage of John Malkovich, has been enormously positive. A. O. Scott raves, "Sivan has accomplished something extraordinary: he has given political extremism a human face" (2000). But that acclaim depends intimately on the assumption that Malli's pregnancy is supposed to be a humanizing event. It is a transcendent narrative: life-giving as human-making. However, in this film, it is ultimately false. Though Malli is carrying a fetus, she is not made human – or more to the point, alive – by that fact. The corpse, for Julia Kristeva, is the ultimate instantiation of the abject. "It is death infecting life" (1982, 4). Not death itself, the corpse is the tantalizing and terrifying remainder of death's encounter with life. It is the body without spirit, without soul, without life. It is remains and reminder, relic of what has been and promise of what is inescapably to be. Malli's corpsely presence within the film, a bodily repetition of a still image of death that has already come to pass, figures abjection not as death infecting life, but in fact, the fetus as life infecting death. Can a corpse, inanimate once more, be animated into the condition of humanness?

The film is not in fact invested in a natalist position *vis-à-vis* Malli: the life inside her is precisely that – proximate to her but not of her. Corpsely, she nourishes a life that grows within her body but like the earth that the farmer tills, made fertile by its intimate, decompositional relationship to death and remains, she is not made alive by that proximity.[5] She is a container for the life inside her, much as she is an agent of the death for which she is tasked. The relationship to life and death for the corpsely figure of the terrorist is not oppositional but rather, as Kristeva puts it, "blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming" (1982, 109).

5 Even her name, Malli, which in Tamil means jasmine, plays with the language of fertility and cultivation, not least in its echoing stutter of the Hindi word *mali*, or gardener.

Malli puts it another way. Finally resolved to carry out the suicide attack, despite the promises of the farmer that he will be grandfather to the child and the disembodied cries of infants in the night, Malli dons her suicidal belt and goes to say goodbye to the farmer's wife, who appears in the final part of the film. She, too, is a still-life. In a waking coma since hearing news of her son's death nearly a decade earlier, the farmer's wife has silently witnessed Malli's deathly preparations. She is a corpsely mirror against which Malli sees herself reflected. Clutching the woman's frozen, outstretched hand, Malli (in her longest speaking scene) says, "I am like you. You have lost your son. I am about to lose too. I must sacrifice my future for that of the people". She prepares to leave but finds herself unable to move. The farmer's wife has gripped her hand and won't let go. Frozen, she appears to find possibility in inanimation: resistance to the externally imposed agency that is the violence of self-destruction. While it is tempting, and maybe even be narratively overdetermined, to

read this as the moment at which Malli decides that she cannot go through with the suicide attack, we might read this corpsely conjoinment otherwise.

The decision that Malli faces is not simply one of life or death, but rather of what kind of futurity she is invested in. With either choice, a future body – individual or generational – is imperiled or espoused. Malli's inability or refusal to follow through with the suicide bombing, stopping just short of Dhanu's final act in her mimesis, is in fact actually still a scene of death. Unable to press the detonator as she stands in front of the VIP waiting to offer him a garland, Malli is once more inanimated, stilled in the moment just prior to what was intended to be their shared stillness. Petals rain down in slow motion from the sky around her, the sound of her breathing amplified as the aural metonym of life itself. The camera cuts between her face and garlanded neck – her eyes unblinking and wide and her mouth agape – and her torso. It does not show the explosive belt that she has strapped to her body but, rather, her navel, coyly hinting at the umbilical tug of the life that infects her corpsely form. It harkens back to two earlier scenes of garlanded death: Gandhi's body carried through the streets of Delhi to the pyre and in the film, Malli's brother on his own pyre, captured from the neck up in the foreground as a young Malli stares unblinking and weeping. There, too, petals swirl around Malli, propelled perhaps by the promise of the future explosion by which they and she will be scattered into the wind. The glimpse of her navel recalls the image of her curled fetal position in the training camp, running her fingers along the *vadhyamala* garland of the condemned around her own neck, the cyanide capsule strung on steel, akin to that which her brother consumes to kill himself. Scenes of death foretold.

Though Malli does not press the button, she *is not* choosing life. The opening scene of the film, in which Malli executes the traitor for his inability to carry out his task, haunts the final scene in which the detonator slips from her hand as she bows to touch the VIP's feet. Her death is foregone and in this moment, she is undead – neither alive nor annihilated.

Had the film carried out its promise to reimagine the scene of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, its final still image might have been the luminous burst of the last photograph from the retrieved camera. Instead, what remains in this final scene is her face, frozen in caress with the camera, and her fingers' bare grip of the detonator. A. O. Scott (2000) asserts that the film, with its almost rapacious proximity to Malli's face, "as if we might be able to find our way into Malli's mind through her pores", gives a human face to the abstract compound noun of "political extremism" and lays bare the abstraction that begins from the place of the inhuman. The face given to political extremism is not its own; humanness is sutured to its intangibility. It is also that which alluringly might offer access to the epistemological void of political extremism – a tactile journey through her pores into her mind. The discourse of her humanity, here for Scott but throughout the critical praise

of the film, turns on the face, a particularly western metaphysical fixation on it as the promise of interiority and subjectivity. Ironically, it is the fragmentation and flattening of Malli into face that most stills her. That which makes her the non-living bomb with certain human characteristics – a face, a womb. The legacy of Dhanu's still image, face but no womb, terrorist in fragments, haunts this final frame.

For an audience hoping for and, indeed, after nearly ninety minutes of extensive close-ups of Malli's face in which she stares directly and unblinkingly into the camera, investing in some glimmer of the recognizably human and humane in the final seconds of the film, Malli's stillness and affective opacity offer little satisfaction. Levinas holds firm to the faith that "the epiphany of the face is ethical" (1969, 199). It is the encounter with the face of the other that produces the primary ethical injunction: *Thou shalt not kill*. And yet. In this moment of the face-to-face that might produce the life-giving commandment, Malli stares not at the VIP whose face we never see but at the camera, at the audience. Who will be killed? Who can be saved?

In 2009, nearly twenty years after the death of her father, Priyanka Gandhi met with Nalini Sriharan, one of the twenty-six people convicted of conspiracy to kill Rajiv Gandhi. Sriharan was as culpable under law as the corpsely Dhanu. Face-to-face with a woman blamed for her father's death, whose death sentence her mother Sonia Gandhi asked to be commuted, Priyanka Gandhi offered neither condemnation nor absolution. She said,

> When I reached there, I realised I am no one to forgive because she has suffered just as I have and I think when people do things like this, they do it out of their own suffering and that is what I understood when I went. ("Priyanka" 2009)

Freud writes in "Reflections on War and Death" that the first commandment not to kill comes from the sight of a corpse of a loved one. "This arose as a reaction against the gratification of hate for the beloved dead which is concealed behind grief, and was gradually extended to the unloved stranger and finally also to the enemy" (1918, 58). It is not love that compels the injunction against murder but hate; it not the face of the other that warrants mercy but our own.

That the film ends with Malli's face rather than her torso stutters the narrative of national repair and reproductivity that the aborted assassination might promise. The VIP in this incarnation is not, and cannot, in a film of postcolonial India, be killed by the female suicide bomber. Nor can the film promise a humanization of political extremism if the face through which that ideology is accessed is stilled in death as its instrument. Nonetheless, the film inescapably returns to the inanimate state that preceded it, the frozen image of a corpsely face. Walter Benjamin writes that the magical, ritual value of a photograph, deliquescing and dissipating through

technologies of reproduction, escapes annihilation as it flees into the face of the human subject:

> The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. (2008, 27)

The auratic trace in the photographic image of the face is the hint of that which has passed away, the contingent spark of a prior moment to which we inevitably return. Early photography, for Benjamin, made this possible in a way that neither still-life painting nor modern photography could. The long exposure time of the early photograph stilled the subject by distilling into the single image there preserved that which both beckons us and remains out of our grasp. In Malli's face, in the final image of the film, stilled not in life and not yet in death, we glimpse that which has come before it and that which it will become. We are threatened and allured by this corpsely face, its promise of futurity and its insistence upon destruction: the *unheimlich* remains of the still-life of the terrorist.

Visibility is a trap

Michel Foucault, describing the scopo-captivity by which disciplinary society renders its subjects, writes, "Visibility is a trap" (1975, 200). Captured in the light of oversight, this visualization is of the kind practiced throughout the twentieth century by states and empires alike. It made knowable and intervenable the bodies whose governance was the project and mandate of power. For the British in India, the visualization of the "native" body – a part of a broad ethnological project in which taxonomy and administration went hand in hand – worked to make space and population manageable.[6] It is within this legacy of imperial image capture, seeking to organize and make knowable subject bodies, that Sivan's film plays with the stilled sight of Malli's face as that of captivating possibility. She is captured and yet flirts with herself capturing the audience whose gaze she holds. However, twenty years after the breathless acclaim of a human face to political extremism, this intimate engagement feels impossibly romantic, insistently gendered, and a touch Oriental-fetishistic. The terrorist of the post-9/11 world is not the subject of this form of capture. Allen Feldman describes the now-infamous Abu Ghraib prison photographs as seeking to depict the body turned inside out (2004, 338). The scopophilic pleasure of the close-ups of Malli's face have given way to a penetrative gaze of another order. Not through the pores into the mind but piercing

6 John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye, between 1869 and 1875, embarked on an ethnological photography project entitled the *People of India* series, a visual compendium of Indian "types" intended to taxonomize and rationalize an otherwise unruly local population. Following the 1875 Mutiny, the

relationship between this visual ordering and imperial oversight formed the backbone of the British Raj's broader biopolitical governance. For more on the relationship between imperial governance and visual technologies, see Ramaswamy and Jay (2014); Rycroft (2006); Chaudhury (2012).

the anus to flay open. An ideological snuff-porn fantasy. We have left the scene of stilling for the scene of torture.

While still images of Malli in Sivan's film and Dhanu in the Indian media promised the inanimation of that which disrupted the state, a quieting of fear that terror might live and move, the terrorist still-lifes of our post-9/11 world circulate to justify the expansion and promulgation of a networked war. They multiply the threat of the terrorist body even as they traffic in the pleasure of its degradation.

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