

What Is Meant by “Terror”

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Terror does not refer to a specific kind of action that can be defined by its intentions, forms, and effects. Terror is a regime of perception and interpretation of facts. At the core of this interpretation, there is an absolutization of the concept of violence. In the past the forms of violence were interpreted as forms of manifestation of a conflictual reality. For instance, the violence of the oppressed people was thought of as a response to the violence of economic exploitation or colonial domination. The “War on Terror” has replaced those causal schemas with the simple ethical conflict between Good against Evil. The paradox is that the reduction of all conflicts to the drama of good and evil ends up making them indiscernible. The present paper examines such reduction through an analysis of two fictions of evil, *Dogville* by Lars Von Trier and *Mystic River* by Clint Eastwood, and provides a wider reflection on the ethical turn of the present.

My title may sound strange, if not outrageous. It may be argued that, for the victims of terrorist attacks—such as 9/11 in New York and the bomb attacks at a railway station in Madrid, a nightclub in Bali, and the hotels in Mumbai—the meaning of the word “terror” is all too clear and does not need any further explication. But we cannot be satisfied with this reference to the plain facts. We know that there were in our recent history many forms of mass slaughter that were not characterized as acts of terrorism. Conversely, there are forms of radical political action that are deemed terrorist today though no blood is spilled. In November 2008 in France, a group of young radical activists was indicted for terrorism after acts of sabotage on a railway line. Those acts were intended to cause delays to the trains, not to harm any passenger or employee (nor did they do so). Sabotage is an old practice of the French anarchist movements, and in