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Research Note: "When 'Childsplay' Gets Lethal": 'Ludic Terrorism' and its Ambivalent Relationship with Postmodernism

Samuel H. Patterson[a1]
[a]Freelance Researcher

Abstract
The research note offers an intuitive insight into a peculiar type of terrorist behaviour. It does so by combining the concept of 'ludic' with terrorism, which is not entirely new (see Shane McCorristine's work on 19th century anarchism as 'ludic terrorism' and its representations in Edwardian literature). But the object of this work is to explore the 'ludic' concept both methodologically (by exposing the linkage between 'ludic' themes of playing, tricking and irony and the theory of postmodernism) and historically by highlighting two serious yet apparently unrelated mainstream cases – Anders Behring Breivik and Elliot Rodger. It is important to note that the study is multi-disciplinary by nature. It draws on philosophy and cultural theorists as well as novelists and film media in order to get to grips with real life traumas experienced by millions of human beings and externalise the dangerous alter egos and apocalyptic pipedreams which are born as a result.

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Introduction

A pioneering yet largely ignored article by Walter Laqueur in 1996 warned of "Postmodern Terrorists" who harbour 'peculiar' and 'arbitrary' motives (Laqueur, 1996; Laqueur 2000). It must be said that the classification relates to the historical condition of postmodernity – an oceanic state of pluralism and relativism devoid of a sense of centre, roots or absolute values – rather than theoretical theory. I argue Laqueur's thinking, which is yet to be adequately developed, urgently needs expanding. In doing so, the article sets itself the purpose of enriching our analytical vocabulary by identifying a key leitmotif of 'Postmodern terrorism':

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Samuel H. Patterson, Email: samhp@live.co.uk, Twitter: @sam0007ster

the 'ludic' principle (deriving from the Latin 'ludere' – meaning 'to play' – cognate with the work of Jean Piaget (1951) on the significance of the 'ludic' principle in the educational and emotional development of children, or 'childsplay' (pp. 120-123)). Note that my use of the 'ludic' concept diverges considerably from its conventional art-historical interpretation, which describes, as Natasha Greenwood (2012) states, an "eclectic, playful combination of styles" symptomatic of postmodern buildings (p. 5). But even this architectural usage relates to 'playfulness'.

Postmodernity is a rich, multi-faceted intellectual, cultural and philosophical phenomenon reflecting societal insecurities about 'identity', 'meaning' and 'existence'. It is indicative, by extension, of a culture swamped in 'isms' and relativism, where competing myths offering truths about civilisation's past, present and future constantly bombard us. It will become clear that 'ludic terrorism' is in a way the product of this culture and, simultaneously, a profound rejection of it by way of the desire to break out of relativism through a pure act of destruction. The focus is thus on a minority struggling to get to grips with reality and who are perhaps best encapsulated by a phrase in a poem by T.S. Elliot (1941): "[humans] cannot bear very much reality" (p. 14).

The vanguard of 'postmodern' intellectuals who first diagnosed it are by now well-known – Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault among others – and they agree that western society is today infested with myriad 'metanarratives' without one single dominant. In this sense, then, Friedrich Nietzsche's (1882) famous proclamation that 'God is Dead' (pp. 343-344) can be taken as proto postmodernist; the *locus classicus* of this disjuncture between past and future. We are all postmodern, according to Lyotard, and we should embrace it by launching a crusade against the proliferation of 'isms' under modernity; the erosion of Judeo-Christian faith under the secularising impact of the Enlightenment; the subsequent decline of rational 'liberal' capitalist and Marxist economic theories of progress (Lyotard, 1979, pp. vii-xi). The postmodern condition is to some liberating, but to others it is symptomatic of a deeper crisis in which humans lack a clear sense of direction and meaning in life (Lyotard, 1979; Jameson, 1989).

So it is in this age of high reflexivity that a profound psychological drive can be identified in the motives of some recent terrorist acts, especially on the part of some *'lone actors'*, who are attempting to break into a realm of freedom and authenticity through a destructive and delusional gesture towards a different 'world'. It is important to note at this early stage the plethora of recent terrorist literature which is particularly disparaging towards the "lone wolves" typology (Hofmann, 2018; Schuurman et al., 2017; Gable & Jackson, 2011), hence the emphasis on my use of the term 'lone actors'. It is rightly argued that the 'lone wolf' term is of little value as it "overstates", as Schuurman et al., makes clear, "the degree of isolation that these individuals experience throughout the (radicalisation) process" (p. 773). In other words, the scholarship challenges the notion of a lone actor's apparent 'loneliness' on the basis that, by adopting such a standpoint, academics (as well as investigative journalists) become guilty of (perhaps inadvertently) *understating* the various ideological influences, underground networks – physical and virtual – and organised terrorist groups in which the 'loner' is embedded.

That should not, however, take away from the idiosyncratic nature of 'ludic terrorism' for I argue that two testcases show a personal process of radicalisation which is self-induced, not as a result of mental illness or pathological sickness as many would infer, but a fanaticism for a nebulous 'higher' cause which is all too easily dismissed as madness. In fact, the inference dovetails nicely with what Roger Griffin has neatly phrased "ideologically-elaborated psychosis" (2012, p. 211) referenced later. So, it would be "reductionist" (Corner and Gill, 2018, p. 147), as I and others argue, to ignore the convoluted nexus of sociological and psychological processes which birth the imagined identities, psychotic fantasies, Manichaean world-view, megalomania and apocalypticism which turn vulnerable yet 'ordinary' human beings into a cold killers (Corner, Bouhana & Gill, 2018). Laqueur asserted that 'Postmodern Terrorists' create an incongruous mix of causes in the manner of postmodern architecture and commit horrific acts of violence – with an action strategy and goal (however delusional) – for the sake of them. The short paper sets out to lay bare this

sinister state of playfulness among a "multiplicity of terrorists" (understood as symptomatic of 'ludic terrorism') which 'bewildered' Laqueur (1996, p. 33).

Highlighting the necessity of Taking Terrorist Motives Seriously

I am modestly attempting, then, to add a (non-authoritative) heuristic device to the field of existential anthropology which I hope can help explain not all but at least some recent acts of monstrous terror. It serves, by extension, to evolve the research premise of recent studies by Griffin and Michael Mazarr which empathise with protagonists of violence and propose models for reanimating the importance of psychodynamic analysis (Griffin, 2012, pp. 5-15; Mazarr, 2007, pp. 204-236). In particular, it will suggest that the 'ludic' principle can be a revealing addition to the conceptional tools that analysts use to examine terrorist motives and mindsets. Moreover, it enriches the 'ludic' principle with connotations of the Hindu concept 'Lila' (from the Sanskrit for 'play' or 'drama') which refers to a desirable sense of divine freedom from the world of necessity, fate and determinism. It concomitantly fosters critical thinking about postmodernity, something yet to be given coverage in terrorist studies literature.

'Ludic terrorism' is unlike that of 'orthodox' nationalistic or religious terrorism, where the protagonists adopt 'nomoi' with *realpolitik* – in principle achievable – goals and clear historical roots. I would like to stress that I do not deny 'ludic terrorists' hold a "suprapersonal goal to which they are fanatically committed" – as per Griffin's tentative definition of terrorism (2012, pp. 11-12; see also Schmid, 2011, pp. 86-87) – for it would be counter-intuitive to refute the essential meaning of terrorism in an otherwise highly contested field (Schmid, 2011; Abrahms 2008, pp. 80-81). Notwithstanding, one oustanding counterexample is the Algerian uprising in the early 1960s, where a surge of populist energy threw off French colonial rule (Zemali, 2017). Colonialism become morally and systematically untenable; Algerian guerrilla terrorism served, as Bruce Hoffman (1996) asserts, a cause "designed to achieve a greater good for a wider constituency" igniting a revolutionary fervour using

targeted violence (pp. 37-38). The infantilism, self-gratification and sense of dissipation associable with the 'ludic terrorist' is, by contrast, entirely 'unorthodox'.

The curious relationship between the postmodern 'ludic' principle and terrorism is oddly enriched by novelists and film-producers who explore extraordinarily rich human phenomena. Griffin (2012) has even suggested that 'one good novel or film' is worth a "whole shelf of impenetrable theory" (p. 107). Taking just one example, the resonance of the violent protagonist – someone utterly marginalised from society – in David Fincher's film *Fight Club* (1999), based on a Chuck Palahniuk novel, helps humanise the mainstream terrorist cases examined later. Hence, by humanising terrorists we are essentially rationalising motives so that 'ludic terrorists' can be paradoxically understood in their extreme irrationality or revolt against reason.

Tyler Durden, the alter ego of the unnamed narrator in *Fight Club,* has an extreme capacity to realise a desire for a more vital, more intense existence, something not found in an ultra-consumerist society which had zombified him into an infinite state of apathy and insomnia (Palahniuk, 1996). Fincher's film encapsulates the drudgery of bureaucratically controlled consumption, where commodities are mass produced to the point Tyler says in the film: "things (material goods) you own end up owning you" (Palahniuk, 1996, pp. 12-14). Tyler is in an "in-between age without great war or great depression" which is resolved via his own creation of a "great revolution against culture" (p. 149). He believes consumer society deprives his ability to freely determine 'self', so this wild alter ego channels a heady pursuit of 'self-discovery' into a violent form of therapy – an underground fight club with its own rules and regulations. Interestingly, the fight club is itself 'ludic' because fighting is an ancient form of 'play'.

The fight club acts as a non-conventional alternative 'space' with a transgressive conception of community for men to get away from domestic and normative 'space' from which they feel excluded – a point discussed in Jeanette Garcia's PhD thesis (2012, pp. 1, 4-5). Tyler builds up such a physiological drive he creates Project Mayhem, a cult which commits terrorist acts that seem particularly utopian, gratuitous, and nihilistic. But note that

Tyler and his followers use terrorism to break out of their imprisoning situation. In this sense, then, violence is giving a profound purpose to very isolated and desperate people (which interestingly aligns with a study which suggests for most terrorist operatives, violence as a means is an end (Abrahms & Conrad, 2017, pp. 283, 287)). Tyler – a seemingly mindless alter ego – is precisely what Nigel Watson (1999) characterises as a "tourist in his own culture"; the dramatization of a subject constructing his own identity and truth (p. 55).

Fincher's portrayal of the Tyler character is part of wider cultural phenomena, expressed precisely in the arts. For instance, David Bowie and the Australian performer Leigh Bowery, among others, are cited as 'postmodern' artists because they were driven by an insistence on "self-expression and self-actualisation", as Greenwood states (2012, p. 5). They are thereby liberated from past strictures as both their stage identities confounded previous expectations of what constituted 'conventionality' (p. 5). The huge difference is that the fictional Project Mayhem, and the 'ludic terrorists' explored here, are driven by a perverse idea of self-actualization devoid of all moral taboos.

One of the features of 'ludic terrorism', then, is the mismatch between the intended effect and real effect. Indeed, what is clear in Tyler is the presence of grandiosity lending to a complete loss of reality. Soberingly, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard's work (1988) even points out that violent dramas are acted out vicariously by video-game enthusiasts on a daily basis (who are therefore also embracing an imagined reality) (p. 1). Baudrillard believed this is part of a society of 'simulation and simulacra', as virtual reality creates an illusionary 'space' – temporally suspending the pressure of postmodern realities – providing a cathartic (and sometimes addictive) sense of participating in a drama with a beginning, middle and end (pp. 1-2).

It is this world of illusion, 'intertextuality', untruthfulness and spectacle which has even spawned a popular subculture of 'cosplay', a Japanese portmanteau of 'play'. With its own gatherings and celebrations, participating in 'cosplay' involves a peaceful desire to temporarily locate oneself in an 'epic story' by dressing up to become a favoured fictional film or video-game character. This could potentially be an 'anti-hero'; an oxymoronic

'lovable criminal'. A tenet of postmodernist thought is, of course, scepticism towards a standardised idea of what constitutes good and evil, righteousness and malevolence, heroism and villainy.

Indeed, this should be of particular interest to the counterterrorism industry because the function of 'play' for the 'ludic terrorist' creates an imaginative dimension; an alternative 'space'. Taken as a necessary starting point, the resonance is highlighted by the case of James Holmes, the man responsible for the Aurora massacre at a film premier in 2012, who told police after his attack that he had become a heroic avatar – 'The Joker' – a villain from the Batman trilogy, and even dyed his hair to show it (Iofre, 2017). Holmes displayed overt signs of insanity, and there was no political goal or "designed consequences beyond the act itself", so in the view of Konrad Kellen (1982, pp. 8-10) and many others (see Hoffman, 1996, p. 38), Holmes cannot be described as terrorist. He is, instead, routinely conceptualised as a psychopathic mass murderer. But what is relevant is that Holmes is making 'cosplay' lethal, a trait shared with 'ludic terrorists' (thereby attaching significance to a recent study which suggests mass murderers and lone actor terrorists may "share a common genesis" (see Clemmow et al., 2020, pp. 1-2)). He immersed himself in an alternative mental 'space' as a sinister clown – a reoccurring motif of Hollywood horror films – wherein killing became a playful activity, whilst the fear and havoc it creates, was for Holmes, an aesthetic pleasure. Another important point here is that the violence was an end in itself (Abrahms, 2008, p. 86).
On this basis, one could even categorise recent crescendos of controlled anger by neo-Nazis in white masks in Germany by *Die Unsterblichen* (The Immortals) and the revived Klu Klux Klan in the US as play-acts, or indeed perverse forms of 'cosplay' (PatrioticTrailerAct, 2011). Both groups embody an Aryan imaginary, as members engage in what the Portuguese call an 'auto-de-fé' – an act of faith – while getting perversely attached to uniform and its nostalgic, racist, and chauvinistic connotations.

‘Lone Actors’: The Case of Breivik

Laqueur in defining ‘Postmodern Terrorism’ said that these terrorists are likely to be “loners”, perhaps even “the computer hacker next door” (1996, p. 35). Andreas Behring Breivik – killer of 77 people on July 22nd 2011 in the Norway attacks – was certainly a loner as well as a keen video gamer, and implicitly ‘ludic’ by way of the ‘make-believe’ alter ego he created for himself (for reasons explained shortly). Using the framework laid out above, it is even possible to see the grotesque ‘Marxist Hunter’ uniform Breivik wore on the day of his attack, for example, as a quintessentially ‘ludic’ manifestation of perverse ‘cosplay’.

The Norwegian detonated a bomb near the Prime Minister’s office in Oslo and then opened fire on members of a Labour Party youth camp. He trained for the attack for over half a decade with a ‘holographic training device’ using the video-game Call of Duty (Pidd, 2012). It seems clear that this is a symptom of his ‘heterotopia’, literally meaning ‘other space’– a concept coined by Foucault (1967, pp. 559-591). The implication is this: in moments of extreme violence, ‘ludic terrorists’ engage in their own sinister ‘space of play’ and are thus completely divorced from reality. In his act of terror, Breivik became ‘Justiciar Knight Andreas Breivik’, a self-styled avatar, with a badge on the shoulder of his police uniform inscribed with ‘MARXIST HUNTER’ and ‘MULTICULTI TRAITOR HUNTING PERMIT’. He believed so fanatically in his cause, he lost the capacity for self-criticism and self-realism. Breivik fanatically believed his violence would trigger a step-change in history but in actuality his action was counter-productive in trying to spark it. He predicted in a 1500-word manifesto that this attack would launch a European independence movement which would bring an end to multiculturalism and the ‘Islamisation of Europe’ by *2083* (Breivik, 2011). It is clear Breivik has an extraordinary capacity to make sense of the world through a fantasy morality and is an empirical validation of the ‘ludic’ principle’s potential potency. So in contrast to the Black Terrorists in northern Italy, for example (active during the late 1960s-80s), whose violence was purposefully and ‘communicatively phatic’ in order to give a message to a third party (a targeted audience), Breivik misread the practical effects of his

actions (Žižek, 2008, p. 66). Indeed, this was a 'lone warrior' absorbed in a Manichaean fantasy trying to eradicate so-called 'cultural Marxism' based on political correctness, totally bereft of compassion for the children he killed, and consequently, the unyielding resentment towards him and his ideas.

Breivik supported a hopeless cause based on the mythicization of 'Europeanness' and the demonization of Islam, by which he spiritualised his world-view into a 'terrorist's creed' (Griffin, 2012, pp. 15-17) and locates the meaning of his attack in a larger metanarrative and is thus hostile to postmodernism. That metanarrative is permeated with a zealotic conception of Europe as a 'organic community' which he believed was being tarnished by open-door immigration policies (Jupp, 2011). He therefore turned the Norwegian establishment into an enemy, reminiscent of the fascistic revulsion against the perceived *die Sumpf* ('swamp') of the Weimar Republic.

Delving deeper still, these killings were for Breivik an act of restoration after a long period of isolation. During his previous career, Breivik had been described as a remarkably likable employee for a customer service company. But investigative journalism has since revealed that, during this time, he was a prominent participant in right-wing chat forums attached to AO-rated videogames he played (Jupp, 2011), a side of himself ostensibly "compartmentalised" before the attack which the American psychiatrist Robert Lifton would label his evil 'double' (Lifton, 1986). Lifton is fabled for a seminal work which examines the psychological mechanisms at play within the psyche of Nazi doctors who were able to 'double'; in other words, commit acts of gross inhumanity at extermination camps whilst simultaneously living 'ordinary' lives as a loving father, husband, uncle etc., (Lifton, 1986). It provides a basis for a position on the issue at the heart of Breivik's court case – the question of his sanity.

In fact, there were two forensic evaluations and two different conclusions. The former offered a diagnosis of schizophrenia and the latter a personality disorder. The emphasis placed on Breivik's 'ludic' profanity here offers not an alternative but a complementary theoretical analysis of his mindset in the spirit of Ingrid Melle's calls for a dialogue to be opened up

between the province of psychiatry – "technical innovations" – and "personal interpretations" offered, in this case, by the human sciences (Melle, 2013, p. 20; see also Misiak, B., Samochowiec et al., 2019). By dismissing Breivik's delusional declarations and grandiose universe – a premise behind the first diagnosis – you also dismiss his dangerous ideology and his resourcefulness to carry out the deadly attack with such adept calmness (Fazel, 2012; Melle, 2013). Hence, the second forensic evaluation was right to conclude that not enough was done in the first to try and rationalise his 'bizarre delusions' and, as Melle writes, "to consult experts on right-wing ideologies... before deciding that many of his perceptions of grandeur were [actually] culturally implausible" (Melle, 2013, p. 19).

Indeed, Breivik's reconstructed court trial in the *July 22* documentary film synthesised with the ICCT research paper on the case (Graaf et al., 2013) brilliantly captures his evil 'double' / 'other space'. In court it was revealed Breivik shared his ideas and views – delineated in fluent English in his manifesto – on the dark web. Even more chilling, the court explicitly highlights that this was a 'irrational' thinker who was concomitantly capable of 'rationally' applying what he had learnt in the virtual world to the real world (Greengrass, 2018). It resonates with Griffin's argument that if Breivik was psychotic, it was "ideologically-elaborated psychosis" (2012, p. 211), thereby highlighting the deeply human need for "transcendence and sacred purpose", after a period of depression, 'anomie' and identity crisis (2017, p. 357-359). The 'ludic' concept thus *offers a non-psychiatric explanation* of his ideas and behaviour and urges readers to look closer at Breivik in the context of his past; the abandoned son pre-occupied by his appearance; the loner who found solace (and belonging) in the profanity of the right-wing culture sphere (Melle, 2013, p. 19).

Breivik's ideology is the product of a society awash with 'isms' and ideas of the past in the form of material easily accessible via internet search. James Jupp's (2011) analysis of *2083* even places considerable emphasise on the fact his ideas were 'copy and paste' and the product of "material [already] on the internet", meticulously chosen and ostensibly repackaged. What we are dealing with here is a 'lone-actor' with no true tradition or leader to enforce his thinking; someone invested in a high-tech dreamworld of simulated martyrdom

and heroism, who spent years impassively killing as a virtual avatar. On July 22nd 2011, Breivik attempted to break out of the absolute relativism of postmodernism killing in the name of his own eclectic ideology.

That very eclecticism, on another hand, demonstrates what is tritely termed ‘intertextuality’. True to that notion, *2083* is written like a collage of ideas. It references, borrows, and indeed imitates ideas of the past. It is a characteristic of the postmodern culture Fredric Jameson (1989), for example, would categorise as mere ‘pastiche’ (pp. 132-133). Breivik’s ideas functioned in a postmodern way in that whilst he copy-and-pastes neo-Nazi ideals on ethnic identity into *2083*, he is also surprisingly hostile towards Adolf Hitler because of the German leader’s “reckless and unforgivable actions” which, as he sees it, inadvertently fashioned the rise and acceptance of ‘multiculturalism’ in post-war Europe (Breivik, p. 940). Breivik’s project of salvation, and the obnoxious vitriolic claims he uses to try and justify it, lack a unifying and coherent direction or narrative.

The Case of Rodger

Twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger from California, now a martyr for the Involuntary Celibates (Incel), is yet another important case study. Rodger had an unrequited impulse to find romance, and in 2014, he killed 10 people in Isla Vista and sacrifice himself because of it. He was bent on taking vengeance against humanity because of his “loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires”, a quote from Rodger’s abstruse ‘Retribution Video’ posted online in the days leading up to the attack. In that video, Rodger outlines his supra-personal mission to overcome anomie by “slaying everything and everyone I see” all because “girls have never been attracted to me” (Rodger, 2014). His motives were thus utterly gratuitous, taking shape and hardening because of a daily diet of loathing and celibacy. His own perverse version of narcissism is spelled out in a 100,000-word manifesto: *The Twisted World of Elliot Rodger* (Roger, 2014).

Rodger even lamented his intentions in the public domain through a video which is still live today with well over one million views. All terrorist attacks are totally anti-ironic, but Rodger presented some very lucid and intelligible social hardships which were not taken seriously then and are still yet to receive objective analysis today. It would be useful to open up a new line of inquiry which dispels apparent illogical, idiosyncratic ideas as simply the monomaniac hatred of a madman and probe deeper into the roots of this profanity; the human need, certainly in Rodger's case, to infuse life in some sort of significance. Joshua Sinai rightly urges academics to take more seriously the "the major drivers that motivate individuals into acts of terrorism" – the aim here is to amplify Sinai's point (Sinai, 2007, p. 4). Demystifying motives, however incongruous or irrational they may seem, is an essential part of humanising and getting a handle on, if not the horrifying act of inhumanity, then the anomic social and cultural factors which lead to it.

Twisted World traces Rodger's life from a childhood of boundless innocence to an adolescence of unrelenting anguish, during which Rodger undertakes a process of self-radicalisation. This process echoes the path taken by Travis Bickle, the protagonist in Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver* (1976), written by Paul Schrader, to a killing spree against what he saw as New York's quagmire of ineffectualness and filth. Bickle, like Rodger, is a catatonically lonely man, who after a mindless, empty period of passivity, breaks into violence. Bickle is plagued by the lack of recognition for his services during the Vietnam War, but most of all, by his inability to hold down any sort of intimate relationship. Over forty-two years on, a similar constellation of personal hardships and unfulfilled desires are regularly expressed on Incel web forums, where anger is fuelled, and misogyny intensifies (Beale, Brace & Coan, 2019, pp. 1, 20). The logic which drove this fictional character into an act of destruction has direct correspondence with Rodger's manifesto.

Rodger gave humanity one final chance when his family moved to Santa Barbara, but that was "the ultimate climax of everything" he says. "I saw it as a new chance for love, sex, friends, acceptance, a sense of belonging" but was denied it (Roger, 2014, p. 82). Out of that despair came an "ultimate world-view", a totally 'ludic' recombination of Western morality,

which involves irony. The most profound expression being his megalomaniac ideal of a society where sexuality would cease to exist, "where women are outlawed" and placed, as he suggests, into labour camps (p. 82). He therefore shows a fanatical commitment to implementing this totally new social reality without any awareness that sexuality takes many forms. Whilst most of Rodger's manifesto develops a narrative of a helpless 'virgin' whose denied any sort of gratitude, suddenly – albeit ironically – it proposes that he has all the credentials to be the "divine ruler" of this 'other' world (pp. 135-136). After the successful execution of his lethal rampage, he asserts that he should henceforth be known as 'The Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger'. In this 'ludic' spirit, he was thus playacting (in Nietzschean terms) a demi-God, an aristocrat (p. 136). Rodger was a loner, communicating with like-minded people (in an online mini group) adopting a noticeably aberrant ideology. The 'Postmodern Terrorist' is a "loner with a grudge", as Laqueur (1996) re-emphasises (p. 34).

These people are quite like the fictional character Travis Bickle – someone 'who cannot take it anymore' (Scorsese, 1976). Rodger is Bickle's real world counterpart (in the internet and social media age), but who talks to 'like-minded' people and rants on Incel forums. Incel is a network for lonely men to wrestle with their own self-loathing and inability to attract a sexual partner. It is part of an online 'manosphere', a misogynistic 'heterotopia' evoking the concept 'hyperreal' (encapsulating Baudrillard's thesis on how technology has become a means to shape superficial realities symptomatic of postmodern culture) (Thiry-Cherques, 2010, pp. 1, 8-9). In this world of illusion, Incels believe they are 'redpilling', a play on the dilemma faced by the protagonist in the film *The Matrix* (1999), supposedly enabling them to realise the delusional reality of a world ruled by vicious women (Squirrell, 2018). It is another outstanding example of the 'ludic principle' in action as this could be labelled a postmodern 'pastiche' of propaganda – an infantile 'propagation of faith' in men's rights' activism. Rodger vented his anger in the real world, fanatically believing that his grievances would be solved through killing and sacrifice.

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Today Incels reincarnate Rodger as the God he proclaimed to be, and in doing so, they chillingly legitimise the use of violence to the organisation's subscribers. Alex Minassian's attack in Toronto four years later is just one such example. Minassian – now described as a "hERo" by the community of celibates (note that Elliot Rodger's initials are capitalised) – whose motivations were akin to Rodger's, drove into a crowd of people in 2018, killing ten ((Beale, Brace & Coan, 2019, pp.17-18). Incels, unable to engage with the outside world, are driven into a reactionary form of politics and members continue to encourage copycats and further acts of violence. Some even romanticise about death to the extent that they find gratification in imagining Rodger stabbing them to death (p. 25).

Illustrating the Importance of the 'Ludic' Concept within Terrorist Literature

Rodger encapsulates the peculiar way the postmodern age is affecting terrorism, thereby compounding the frustration of specialists in trying to achieve a "consensual definition" of it (Sinai, p. 47; Spencer, 2006, pp. 2-13). But the aim of this short paper is by no means to offer a revised definition of terrorism, but to provide a theoretical-conceptual discussion which concentrates almost exclusively on the *motivations* of two sole attackers (see point 11 of Alex P. Schmid's Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism) (2011, p. 87). It thus purports to demystify an aspect of causation from the perspective of a 'lone actor' terrorist (Nesser, 2012, p. 61; Schuurman et al.,), someone who could also plausibly be termed 'leaderless resistance' (Kaplan, 1997) – a concept which still recognises the existence of an underground network or external influences on the perpetrator (Nesser, 2012).

The paper heuristically proposes that we probe deeper into the perceived realities of the perpetrators, whose motives seem gratuitous but are submerged in a *postmodern dimension of a hyperreal game-like fantasy*, as it is still necessary to recognise and appreciate their actions. Its emphasis, therefore, is psychological. Indeed, the research note does two things. Firstly, the concept of 'ludic' provides a gateway into the profanity of attackers such as Rodger whose violence was an expression of his subjective anguish and, simultaneously,

moment of devotion to a loosely-defined community in which he felt included – ironically today he receives the recognition on Incel he so desperately craved in real life (Beale, Brace & Coan, 2019, p. 25). Secondly, it humanises the existential dimension of a terrorist's motives, quoted with monotonous regularity in terrorist literature, and helps see their act of violence in the light of its liberating effect. The latter aim draws motivation from Robert Robins and Jerrold Post's study (1997) on self-sacrificial terror in which they talk about how a lone perpetrator "experiencing psychological apocalypse" creates "meaning in their mind" through a destructive act because suddenly they feel "power and significance" (p. 144). Their assertions explicitly correspond with how Breivik – once described as "somewhat shy" – and self-descriptively powerless in a 'multicultural' world he fervently decried – was "laughing" whilst killing and extrovertedly communicated his 'ludic' identity to the police in a strategic phone call made during his attack (Melle, 2013, p. 16). The loner, in his mind, had become a warrior.

Unlike 'Postmodern Terrorists', Laqueur (1996) professes, "terrorism [of the past] was always the province of groups of militants with the backing of political forces" (p. 34). I argue that there are some clear similarities and differences. Admittedly, members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), for example, have similarly been seen in the light of creating an "imagined community" (Bolt, 2008) in their ransacking of the past to find collective moments – whether heroic or tragic – of Irish history to garner the support for the irredentist cause (pp. 51-53). But the IRB's metanarrative, amid bouts of sectarianism and nationalism in early twentieth century Europe, was far from as incongruous as the 'ludic terrorists'' examined here. The IRB conceived of a historically rooted "ethnic struggle", backed up a sense of Gaelic and Catholic revivalism as expressed in culture through Republican theatre plays and weekly newspapers – no doubt informed by the socialism of Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels – which helped legitimatise later international struggles on part of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and West Germany's Baader-Meinhof Gang (Bolt, 2008, pp. 50-54).

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The IRB's cause was *a real struggle* rooted in history, just as Baader-Meinhof was a product of the 'hippie' youth counterculture and revolutionary student protests in the 1960s-70s, a generation railing against societal repression and war in Vietnam. These were *discernible causes*; Baader-Meinhof devised a Marxist analysis of West Germany believing it was too reminiscent of its authoritarian, Nazi past and its members were thus immersed in a lifestyle of activism and violence in the hope they could overthrow it. Ambushes, assassinations, raids and kidnappings were undertaken by both groups against the backdrop of revolutionary situations, but there was a necessity to create chaos and confusion as the propaganda of the deed was seen as a means and end in itself (Bueno de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007; Townsend, 2018; Bolt, 2008; Garrison, 2004). Nor should it be denied that the goals of cell members were not always ideologically coherent. Andreas Baader, one of Baader-Meinhof's founders for instance, is said to have been largely trapped in rhetoric and more committed to an underground lifestyle of hedonism, sex, and drugs (Griffin, 2012, p. 141).

Nevertheless, the argument is that the 'ludic terrorist' is less engaged in a struggle with goals (or better: immediate gains), than one that is spiritual; more transcendent than tactical. Lying dormant within Rodger and Breivik was a curious mindset, a heroic self-styled avatar, for which "war", as Christopher Coker asserts, "[felt] akin to an epiphany or a religious experience" (Coker, 2007, pp. 4-5). For instance, war was for Breivik – or his evil 'double', the Justiciar Knight – as empowering as his "performance" (Graaf et al., 2013), 'play-act' or even perverse 'cosplay' during his trial (Breivik had requested to wear a self-made military outfit but was denied the opportunity). It was for him a propaganda stunt – an intention he spelt out in his manifesto (Breivik, 2011, p. 947). He felt compelled to speak in public because his act of terror was 'liberating', offering him a prestigious place among his (nevertheless disjointed, perhaps fake) organisation "the Knights Templar". The trial also opened up another opportunity for the 'Knight' to re-live his moment of 'heroic redemption' and communicate his afterthoughts to the imagined international community (a hyperreality absorbed in AO-rated video games) – hence his use of the collective pronoun "we" (Graaf et al., 2013, pp. 7-8). In fact, the Norwegian was so fervently committed to his cause that he

decided against appealing his eventual sentence (twenty-one years) on the grounds that he would be legitimatising a judicial process which he fundamentally disagreed with (p. 9). More irony, of course, lays in the fact he denied himself a second publicity stunt.

Conclusion

Rodger and Breivik both adopted a mini-Napoleonic complex in a purely surreal age of souring depression and suicide and, somehow, the thrill of destruction became a manic solution. Both waged an unwinnable war against society with an utter disregard for human life, and so it says a lot about the need for society to build institutions which embrace those who feel disenfranchised, deprived and isolated – especially younger people – and encourage them to see the validity of others and, indeed, themselves (something which Hegelian philosophy interestingly bears out (1807)). In Rodger's case, by embracing this palpable sense of alter ego – The Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger – Rodger's identity was smoke-screened by a vulgar compilation of vulgar narcissism and misogyny which seemed nebulous, ludically abstract and totally absurd.

Scholars talk a lot about fanaticism, terrorism and all its horrendous repercussions (Townsend, 2018, pp. 70-71; Chase, 2004, p. 358; Rosenfeld, 2010), but paradoxically, by introducing the 'ludic' principle concept – which seems incongruous – it may be possible to get a better handle on the dimension of 'being a terrorist' which is all too easy to overlook. My exploratory analysis suggests it could be a valuable concept which shows that by acting out or playacting a fantasy morality, 'ludic terrorists' achieve a form of existential redemption in a parody of sacred devotion to a cause, as in their act of 'mission' (terrorism) some liberate themselves from the burden of being alive by accepting death for a higher cause. This paper also stressed that the 'ludic' layer in some terrorist mindsets is rooted deep in the human need to break out of normlessness and radical anomie, thereby lifting the weight of absurdity and giving meaning to life; thus creating, as sociologist Peter Berger termed it, a 'nomos' (Berger, 1967, pp. 19-20).

Though inevitably exploratory, I have attempted to formulate a new heuristic device and therefore my main emphasis is methodological. In doing so, I have drawn on insights from sociological and literary theory and even cinematic fiction to help make sense of a peculiar form of terrorist behaviour, but also humanise and identify with the protagonists of violence. The test cases say a lot about the need for intelligence agencies to get to grips with the socio-psychological roots of 'ludic' profanity. That can be done, I believe, by bridging the dichotomy which continues to exist between them and the academic community (English, 2016).

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