The dimensions of fear in the storytelling of European terrorism: The case of Bataclan

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Introduction: The concept of fear

The feeling of fear, as an engine of human attitudes and behaviour, has been the subject of renewed focus in recent years. Many media studies have shown the role of this assumption in the strategies of information, altering the logic of construction of the news and creating a tendency to normalize the panic that results from the distortion of reality.

However, in order to conceptualize this feeling and grasp the dimensions that allow us to use it in the analysis of social, cultural and political processes, we need to draw on a literature that feeds on different perspectives. Looking back, we already find the recognition of the power of the impact of fear on macro and micro phenomena, thanks to philosophers, sociologists and political scientists, united by an unprecedented ability to access the complexity of the human being as a starting point to shed light on the paradoxes of history, society and politics. It is enough to think of the *insecuritas* of the natural condition described by the philosophers of the seventeenth century, and in particular of the state of *bellum omnium contra omnes* determined by a mutual fear, placed by Hobbes (1959) at the origin of the State. But also to the "residues" of Pareto (1988), which insist on the incidence of instincts, passions, impulses and fears that create stagnation and innovation, generating actions, reactions of individuals and groups, as well as the need to rationalize, cover or justify them.

In our opinion, in order to translate the complexity of the feeling of fear into an operational concept for the analysis of communicative processes, the reflection of Guglielmo Ferrero (1981) is of particular interest. This author assigns to fear the interpretation of the duality of man and identifies different functions. In fact, fear can push

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to immobility or activism and trigger circuits and/or spirals that find an interruption only where there is a general orientation of spirits that creates consensus around political institutions and legitimizes the work. In Ferrero's conception, fear acquires a multidimensionality, which is useful for reflecting on actors, uses, functions of feelings triggered by the presence of dangers, real or imaginary, as well as by the instrumentalisation of these, in order to control reality.

We therefore find a foreshadowing of what Bauman calls "social fear": a fear with which we give a name to our uncertainty, to the ignorance of the threat, behind which the inability to control the consequences of the changes that we experience in our time lies. The "liquid fear" Bauman (1999) talks about is the most fearful, because it has no clear address and cause, and persecutes us without reason. It is a fear that arises from the threat to the community, the result of a collective imagination, often resulting from a misleading use of the mass media, and therefore attributable to the representations of social problems that echo in the available information, mainly about terrorism in Europe.

According to Ferrero, men react to this state of fear if they see an active legitimate government, a power built by democratic consensus that guarantees the conditions of security and stability, required as an antidote to social fear. For the purposes of the analysis of media choices, in the conceptualization of the theme, the different dimensions that fear assumes are therefore relevant. According to Ferrero, this can be identified in an active and passive dimension of fear that we used in our analysis. Two dimensions that refer respectively to the systems of protection and the institutions that exercise it, and to the capacity of reaction that instead involves the citizenship.

From social fear to media fear

On the level of media representation, international literature (Altheide 1997; 1999; 2002; 2006; 2007) has long recognized the existence of a consolidated *frame of fear* in the news. This frame has sometimes been instrumental to the legitimisation of security policies, to the strengthening of strategies of exclusion from otherness or to the most recent policies on immigration in countries such as Italy. It is based on persuasive communication, symbolic awareness and the expectation that danger and risk are fundamental characteristics of the real environment.

Starting from the studies in which Altheide investigated the nature and frequency with which fear is presented in the news and the issues to which it is associated, research carried out by Lumsa University has aimed to detect the connotation taken on by fear in the news on European terrorism. In order to analyze qualitative dimensions of fear in newspapers, we used Ferrero's categories of active and passive fear referring to the role

institutions - as a system of protection - had in the news. At the same time, we applied the category of passive fear (named "reactive fear" by Altheide, 1999) on those articles which focused on the capacity of reaction against fear and terrorism by citizens.

The attack in Paris on 13 November 2015 was taken as a case study, in view of the relevance of the event for the number of victims and the modalities of the attack[2]. The attention has been turned towards the analysis of the subjects, the contexts and the dimensions of the fear in the news reported by the press for its importance in the construction of interpretative models and frames of reference that can be used to read the social phenomena, even in an era marked by mass self-communication (Castells 2009). In particular, the research aimed to detect, through content analysis and frame analysis, whether fear can be understood not only as a frame of interpretation of the event, but also as a narrative plot, to the point of hypothesizing a real *storytelling of fear and terror* built by information.

Research results

Subjects and contexts of fear

The theme of the terrorist attack in Paris has undoubtedly obtained a particular visibility on all the newspapers examined in this first phase of the research (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*[3]) (Tab. 1). Overall, 399 articles were found in the sample period (14-30 November 2015), including articles on the front page (29%) and internal references (71%), mostly detected in sections specifically dedicated to the attack (such as *Je Suis Paris, The Paris Massacre* or *The Islamic Terror in Europe*) and in the traditional foreign section.

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage
Corriere della Sera	164	41
La Repubblica	145	36
La Stampa	90	23
Total	399	100

Tab. 1. Newspaper Distribution

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2   The event represented the bloodiest aggression on French Territory since the Second World War and the second most serious terrorist act within the borders of the European Union after the attacks of 11 March 2004 in Madrid, causing 130 victims, belonging to 26 different nationalities, and more than 360 wounded.

3   In the second phase of the research, the analysis of the most read Italian newspapers, according to Audipress data, will be accompanied by the analysis of two newspapers with the most marked editorial line (*Il Manifesto* and *Il Giornale*) and the commemorations of the attacks in 2016 and 2017.

Events are mainly divided into topics within the genre of crime, using the terrorist attack to describe the fact-news, followed by an accurate description of the reactions and consequences for France, but also for Italy, Europe and other countries. A significant percentage of the articles also aimed to deepen the biography of the victims or terrorists involved in the attack, to describe the measures/strategies of security adopted and to report the carrying out of the investigations by the forces of law and order.

According to the fact-news, Isis, as a terrorist cell, generates fear in much more than half of the articles subjected to analysis, together with a generalized attacker and the nationality/religion of the attacker. Besides the attackers, the common people and the victims are involved in the environment of fear, followed by the actors of the French, Italian and EU institutional world and the security forces.

The irruption of terror in daily life is what mainly generates fear: national newscasts show how the entire country, despite having been a victim through the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and then the Nice massacre, found itself completely unprepared for this terrorist attack, a multiple and simultaneous raid, a real assault on the heart of Paris. Despite being aware of the incautious French foreign policy on the Middle East front, the newspapers at the same time emphasize how the timing, the places and the methods of the attack were unpredictable for the French citizens: "On a Friday night like many others, on a cool Parisian evening, the rock concert at the Bataclan concert hall has turned into a nightmare" (*La Stampa*).

Another narrative strategy used by the information to generate fear is the alarm of a possible further attack by Isis, with unknown times and ways, which goes well beyond national borders. The citizens' fear, as well as that of the institutional world, is also traced back to the terrorists' freedom of movement, to the strategies adopted, to the context and repetitiveness of the attacks, to the number of people involved in the attack.

The institutional world is, in this case, partially called into question, as are the security forces: their impotence/inadequacy in the face of the threat of Isis contributes to the generation of fear, but it is acknowledged it acted "in critical points where it is easy to strike, exploit the confusion, put the apparatuses of the security in crisis" (*La Repubblica*). A choice only apparently casual as "places of leisure, a symbol of resistance to jihad" (*La Stampa*).

Quantitative and qualitative dimensions of fear

The analysis of the content of the news, together with the linguistic choices, the images, the titles and any comments/opinions, made it possible to detect a widespread

trend on the part of the main Italian newspapers aimed at presenting the events through the *frame of fear*.

The monitoring of the analyzed newspapers has shown how they used the *frame of fear* to contextualize the facts mainly through the methods of construction of the narrative plot (46%). Although not explicitly mentioned, fear takes shape from the story of the attack toward a climax that leads the reader to a state of mind of his own. Fear was then the fulcrum of the narration also because it was explicitly mentioned by the journalist (31%) or made tangible by the actors involved in the events narrated (23%).

On a quantitative level, according to Altheide, the analysis allowed us to highlight the degree of fear represented in the articles and its association with the dimensions of terror, anxiety, horror and collective panic reactions[4] (Tab. 2). This fear mainly takes shape through a wise use of the narrative plot, involving individuals and the community, so it becomes necessary to "get used to fear" (*Corriere della Sera*).

Dimensions	Average value
Fear	5.49
Terror	4.57
Anxiety	4.07
Horror	4.00
Collective panic	3.87
Total	4.40

Tab. 2. Quantitative dimensions of fear

The association of fear with the dimension of terror is particularly present for which "the city of kisses risks becoming the city of terror, where fanatical murderers sow death. And so, they erase memories, dreams of happiness" (*Corriere della Sera*). A terror that spreads in Paris, but that spreads beyond national borders because "terror has no state, knows no borders, is at all times everywhere and nowhere" (*La Repubblica*).

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4   The use of Likert's scale has allowed us to grasp on a scale from 1 (lowest level of fear) to 7 (highest level of fear) the average value of fear and its associated dimensions, not using the agreement/disagreement levels emerged from the article, but the semantics present in the text. Given the difficulty of taking over the interior stages recognized by all the methodological literature (Cannavò, Frudà 2012: 329), we tracked the text using this perspective, working on the semantic force of the terms recalled by the article in relation to the fear. The criteria for measuring this intensity have therefore concerned not only the frequency of use of the terms in the article, but also their association with personal or non-personal consequences on people's life.

Anxiety, detected above all in terms of unpredictability, has a lower average value. If, on the one hand, "an event like that in Paris was a freezing shower for everyone", on the other, "the signals have remained unheard, Europe is under siege and has demanded nothing" (*Corriere della Sera*). Newspapers also often resort to the association with horror by talking about "theatre of horror" (*Corriere della Sera*), "Friday of horror" (*La Repubblica*), "horror at the Bataclan concert" (*La Stampa*).

Finally, the association of fear with collective panic reactions is of specific importance, especially in the moments following the attack, for which "panic scenes have been repeated in several places in the capital, with people running away screaming and policemen being deployed after firecrackers have gone off or after other suspicious noises. Parisians know that new attacks could come" (*Corriere della Sera*).

At a qualitative level, fear emerges in its *active* and *passive* forms: the reaction that blocks the capacity of action/decision of the social body is progressively replaced by a series of dynamics on the part of the various social actors, aimed at putting in place the necessary countermeasures to face the fear aroused by the attacks. These are mainly the implementation of protection systems to contain the potential and/or actual danger, the tightening of the security policies, the reactions of the political institutions and the protagonism of the security institutions called to action.

The fear of a besieged city, with which neither Parisians nor tourists are familiar, in which shops are closed and streets deserted, with terrified people in a state of shock, along with the fear of not being able to return to being what it was like before, is replaced, even if not completely, by an active fear. It takes shape in a crescendo that goes from the proclamation of the state of emergency (the first in France since the Algerian war) to the closure of the borders, going through the state of war, to provide, in its most extreme positions, the ban on any Islamic organization. These countermeasures are implemented by the institutions, but also by the security forces for the strengthening of vigilance and controls, as well as operations aimed at tracing those responsible for the attack. The fear considered in its passive dimension re-emerges when the reflections on the relapses of the attack take place, so that "to react is the watchword of the French, but the fear is not erased" (*La Repubblica*).

The reference to *sentiment*, the description of the state of mind that one breathes in the place of the attack and between national, European and international institutions, also significantly contributes to the construction of the multidimensionality of fear. In the first phase of the analysis, in fact, the *sentiment* prevails anchored to the passive dimension of the fear that "Paris is a city in terror" (*Corriere della Sera*). The simultaneous attack left "Paris in shock", "swollen with sadness, traumatized, horrified by tragedy and disconcerted by discovering itself so fragile and furious", but at the same

time it is necessary "to restore humanity to the horror", taking the necessary counter-measures to counter the fear of the attacks.

Among the actors in charge of containing the *sentiment of fear* (Tab. 3), the role covered by the institutional world stands out, called into question by the journalistic treatment of the attack in 34% of cases collectively (French, Italian, European and international institutions). A second typology of actors is represented by the organs of the security: police and military/army (35%), to which intelligence is added in some cases (8%). The precious work carried out is highlighted: "A unified vigilance on the external borders, a coordinated intelligence operation against the armed groups, are what is necessary to save freedom" (*La Stampa*). At the same time, while recognizing its strategic value in the fight against terrorism, the newspapers underline how the Parisian attack demonstrates that "all the intelligence has failed. No one has been able to prevent the attack" (*La Stampa*).

The inability to face the threat of terrorism appears even more evident when the percentages are considered without being grouped into types of actors: the most significant fact is the widespread recourse by Italian news to undefined or unspecified actors who should, at least in theory, stem the fear of terrorism (23%).

Actors	Percentage
None/Not specified	23
Police	18
Military/Army	17
French institution	13
Intelligence	8
International organization	8
European institution	7
Italian institution	6
Total	100

Tab. 3. Actors called to contain the sentiment of fear

Fear and social problems

Looking at the above percentages, containing *a* "black, suffocating and dry fear" (*La Repubblica*) is therefore a task so onerous that it cannot be supported by any actor or, on the contrary, that it must be managed by a multiplicity of actors precisely because it is a "social fear". This fear is fuelled by media coverage, which is linked to the representation of other social problems.

The media discourse on the terrorist attack on the Bataclan confirms what Altheide (2002) maintained, according to which more and more themes are framed as problems which end up having fear in common. "The cloak of fear and pain that hovers over the French capital on the night of the attack" is in fact able to summarize "all the questions of security, of the clash of civilizations, of the methods to be employed against the terrorist threat, of the political and military response to terrorism, of privacy and democratic guarantees" (*Corriere della Sera*).

The social problems that fear connected to the terrorist attacks derives from, where specified (87 %), are therefore numerous: from the instability of the political sphere (Italian, French and European) (7 %) to immigration (6 %), from the crisis of the intermediate institutions (5 %) to criminality (3 %). However, religious fundamentalism (66 %) is the first and most important social problem that fear linked to terrorist attacks can be attributed to. A complex problem to be faced with a "reaction without compromise", but also through a "cultural battle, without the usual hypocrisies, with which to unravel the self-deception and historical falsehoods that nourish radical extremism" (*Corriere della Sera*). The battle that must be waged is also to help the moderates, easy targets of the most extremist tendencies, through a long-term strategy. Only a cultural war on terror can in fact allow us to prevail against "such a dramatic challenge", in which "terror and fear are the objectives of the cells that obey the caliphate", where to be called into question it is "the joint capacity for reaction of European countries" and, more generally, "our conscience of the West" (*La Repubblica*).

The storytelling of fear and final remarks

The analysis of all the variables has made it possible to highlight how the aforementioned newspapers have chosen to construct the *storytelling of fear and terror* mostly through a fictional recounting of events (62 %), which was preferred to the style of a news article or column (38 %). As the literature on the subject states, global communication does not in fact produce knowledge, but transient narratives, such as journalistic narratives, that dominate the facts and are engulfing compared to all knowledge (Rufino 2017).

The characters that animate this storytelling have been identified in the subjects that embody the figure of the hero and the anti-hero: regarding the former, as in the case of the actors called on to contain the feeling of fear, the wide recourse to the category of none/not specified has previously been pointed out. This category is well ahead of national, community and international political figures, security forces, victims and ordinary people, actors of various kinds.

The narrative elements that, on the contrary, sketch the figure of the anti-hero are oriented in more than half of the cases to belonging to a terrorist cell, but there are references to the link with Islam and being a murderer or a suicide. The recourse to the item none/not specified is, in this case, rather small, since Isis strongly claimed the attack on Twitter with the hashtag in Arabic, "Paris is in flames".

The protagonists of the events, as heroes and anti-heroes, are included in a narrative of fear and terror based on specific devices. The first of these devices can be identified in the construction of a climate based on metaphors and rhetorical phrases aimed at defining the scenario as post-apocalyptic, outlining gloomy and sometimes unrealistic atmospheres for which "in Paris the atmosphere is both terrible and surreal" (*Corriere della Sera*).

Next to this device there is the use of metaphors that define the frame of the terrorist attack as the *frame of the war* (Romania 2017), linking what happened to important war events such as world wars, religious wars, crusades, transforming "Paris into a battlefield" (*La Repubblica*).

To these devices the "construction of '*we*' feeling" is added. In line with the news value of the geographical proximity, it helps to make Italy and Europe feel like victims of the terrorist attack, prompting the information to say that "we are all shaken and under shock" because "Paris is us", "we are all at the Bataclan" (*Corriere della Sera*). The description of the setting in this case is nourished by the use of a *sentiment* that humanizes the results of the attack, as well as the city of Paris defined as sad, traumatized and horrified, fragile and furious, frightened, but alive.

One last device found in the construction of the storytelling of the chronicles of the Bataclan attacks is the construction of a climate of fear that generates suspense. This "cliff-hanger" strategy creates a state of suspense, a sort of dramaturgical pause which serves as a tool for *audience engagement* (Busselle, Bilandzic 2008). In creating a state of suspense, it conveys to the audience the idea that the danger is not over, that the risk has not ended with the attack and that the state of fear must remain active. In this specific case, the cliff-hanger is based on the idea that Italy could be the next target and that fear is palpable and motivated: for this reason, "raise the alert level" and "the Jubilee is a high-risk event" (*Corriere della Sera*).

The objective of this storytelling does not therefore seem to legitimize repressive and security policies, but in general to maintain a high state of fear in the readers, making these measures appear insufficient and inadequate, in order to increase the level of transport and engagement by the public. It will be interesting to evaluate whether such final remarks can be extended for the second phase of the research, but, above all,

whether it will be possible to trace counter-narratives useful to face the fear of terrorism also through the media.

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