

The Discourse of Fear

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When fear is the prevailing framework for looking at social issues, then other competing frames and discourses lose out.

– Altheide and Michalowski

Samina Mansuri's solo exhibition *DARR: 37 Conversations* (*darr*, meaning "fear" in Urdu) is a timely inquiry into the discourse of fear on the third anniversary of 9/11. It presents Mansuri's first feature-length video comprised of 37 conversations filmed during the IntraNation artist residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 2004. The work documents the participants' responses to fear in relation to nationalism, globalization, and cultural identity. Many of the speakers—cultural activists, politically-engaged artists and writers—critique the construction of fear in society, pointing to the problems of representation that underlie it and implications for understanding social realities.

A basic human emotion, fear is pervasive today in popular culture, public discourse and the news media. One need only think of the debates surrounding Michael Moore's latest film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the "fear coverage" of the September 11 attacks in general, and, though unlike these other forms of "infotainment" but no less riveting, the prime-time reality TV show, *Fear Factor*. Clearly fear sells. According to David L. Altheide and other media scholars, by marketing fear in both news and entertainment programs whose formerly distinct formats are increasingly blurred, the mass media are the principle contributors to the current discourse of fear.ⁱ Reliant on formal agents of social control as sources, the media's uses and abuses, especially in news production, of fear as a "problem frame" has created a belief that danger and risk affect every aspect of culture in ways that appear acceptable, natural and normal.ⁱⁱ When fear is used as an ideological framework through which events and knowledge of them are cast, it becomes a matter of discourse.

Significantly, *DARR* explores today's culture of fear not only as a symbolic construction generated by theoretical discussions, the public sphere, and the media's use of "fear frames," but also as a real experience of everyday life. Mansuri's video is a compilation of oral statements, accounts and personal stories in response to the question: "what are you afraid of?" The topics discussed range from the contexts of public culture and mass communications, surveillance (border crossing) and social control (the fear of control and control of fear), to the fear of otherness (homophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism), children and community, war and violence, and fear itself. From within a heavily mediated perceptual field of fear discourse, the resulting multiple meanings of fear nevertheless expose the personal and psychological dimensions of how danger and risk is perceived or experienced, not only in the public arena but also on a more personal level.

The deliberate candid dialogues in real-time, overlays of quiet scenic settings, artists' projects and various shot types challenge conventional media formats. Played simultaneously at staggered time intervals on four monitors in the gallery, the video's presentation as an installation stripped bare of the comforts of home moves away from the easy-to-understand, fast tempo narratives expected under normal television viewing conditions. Absent are the dramatic action sequences and willing suspension of disbelief familiar to television viewers, as well as immediate visualizations of violence or images of trauma. Instead Mansuri's video concentrates on how fear topics get taken up, discussed, framed and culturally internalized. While the impossibility of paying attention to all the monitors at once creates an informational overload, the composed yet powerful accounts balance the highly political terrain of fear discourse in their unwillingness to compromise on the intensity of its subject to the powers of media representation. Moreover, in the simple engagement of the human voice, the space of mediated orality created corroborates not only the bodily presence of the speaker but that of the viewer, offering the possibility for the addressee to enter into the discussion.ⁱⁱⁱ If the global incursion of media formats has produced a shrinking public sphere, the collective space of experience provided by the work offers an alternative means of engagement. In effect, *DARR* is as much about the media, as it is made possible through its use.



In exploring the many faces of fear, the video offers insights into the expectation of danger central to a "risk society" and potential courses of action within. Fear is a key element in creating the "risk society," a term first introduced into sociology over ten years ago by Ulrich Beck and closely linked to the concept of "security" in the work of Anthony Giddens.^{iv} In the shift from "industrial society" to "risk society," rather than the state as the primary referent of security, the reflexive burden of handling risk in the contemporary world is placed upon the shoulders of the individual and imagined communities. At base, the main security "threat" which individuals face is the threat to their own identities and conditions of existence, which, for better or for worse, are no longer supported by traditional institutions but are constantly at risk. The responses in *DARR* critically underscore how issues of race/ethnicity, social class, gender, culture and nationhood are implicated with fear, greatly affecting the interpretation of risk and drastically altering how situations are dealt with and ultimately the situation itself. Hence Roy Miki's poignant call in the video to personal responsibility in creating the collective conditions of possibility for "ethical zones."

Today, as Giddens and others assert, there is a "globalization of risk in the sense of intensity" and in terms of "the expanding number of contingent events which affect everyone or at least very large numbers of people on the planet."^v If the "institutionalisation of risk" is now a fundamental characteristic of society, and its coupling with a discourse of fear seemingly indissoluble, then the grappling with how danger and risk are perceived and processed in projects such as Mansuri's *DARR* become all the more crucial. In the words of Edmund Burke, "no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

ⁱ A discourse of fear may be defined as “the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness and expectation of danger and risk as central features of the effective environment.” David L. Altheide and R. Sam Michalowski, “Fear in the News: A Discourse of Control,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 40:3 (1999) 475-6.

ⁱⁱ The “problem frame” exists as a generic “fear machine” in news production. David L. Altheide, “The News Media, The Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 38:4 (1997) 648.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction* [Introduction à la poésie orale] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990).

^{iv} Altheide, “Fear in the News,” 476; Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, [1986] 1992); Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, eds., *Reflexive Modernization* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

^v Beck, et al., *ibid.*