Most literary and cinematic works on terrorism have focused on the victims of violence, or perhaps on their rescuers (ex. Hollywood heroic narratives), but increasingly works have been appearing from the perspective of terrorist perpetrators. They belong to categories such as suicide bomber narratives, hostage-taking narratives, and most significantly, radicalization narratives (with some overlap). These books and films allow us to “light dark places” (Hany Abu Assad, director, Paradise Now), compel us to look at terrorists from a different perspective, and throw into question the opposition between “we” and “they” (Edward Said). This exposé of radicalization processes counters the post-colonial, counter-terrorist attempt to undercut the framework of space and time. In “The Essential Terrorist” (2001), Edward Said wrote: “As a word and concept, ‘terrorism’ has acquired an extraordinary status in American public discourse. It has displaced Communism as public enemy number one, although there are frequent efforts to tie the two together. . . . it has imported and canonized an ideology with origins in a distant conflict, which serves the purpose here of institutionalizing the denial and avoidance of history” (149). But the radicalization narratives that have begun appearing in literature and film directly address this willful avoidance of history by focusing on context in both space and time. In my discussion I want to demonstrate the ubiquity of the topic first by highlighting different genres, ranging from novels and graphic texts to films, and second by providing examples from countries as diverse as Northern Ireland, Germany, Pakistan, India, and Palestine. Due
to time constraints, I won't be able to discuss all of the works in depth, but I hope to provide an overview with a closer look at several representative works.

Edward Said said of counter-terrorist ideology that it is selective in identifying the enemy: “‘we’ are never terrorists no matter what we may have done; ‘they’ always are and always will be” (154), and it attempts “to obliterate history, and indeed temporality itself. For the main thing is to isolate your enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby to portray him or her as ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake” (154). Recent radicalization narratives, and more generally perpetrator narratives, supply just those elements: a temporal (historical) framework, an explanation of causality, and a spatial context. Examples of these narratives, as mentioned above, can be drawn from different genres, including those that represent popular culture such as graphic novels or theatrical films; and they explore socio-political tensions in numerous hotspots around the world. This fact alone challenges the worldview in which terrorism is associated exclusively with Islamism.

Stories of political radicalization, by definition, suggest multiple contexts because the underlying project is to explain and understand a significant portion of a person’s life. Treatments include both fictional accounts, in some cases based in real-life events, and autobiographical, first-person, tell-all style narratives. The focus since 9/11 has been on Islamist [I am using the term Islamist here to mean the politicization of the religion Islam] radicalization narratives, but there are also earlier precedents, some stemming from terrorists in Germany in the 1960s and ‘70s. Bommi Baumann published in 1975 an autobiographical account entitled How it all began: The Personal Account of a West German Urban Guerrilla, that foreshadows many of the themes
salient in later first-person accounts: identity issues, social discrimination, dysfunctional families, everyday violence, experiences of injustice, and one or more “turning-point” events (in Baumann’s case the murder of an innocent student during a peaceful demonstration). Another early precedent for radicalization stories would be a film by Volker Schlöndorff, the German director known for his literary adaptations. His adaptation of Heinrich Böll’s novel *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1975/1976) won international acclaim. The novel’s subtitle tellingly reads: “How Violence Can Arise and Where it Can Lead.” The film is an indictment not only of the police’s collusion with the press, but also of state terrorism that violates civil rights with impunity, under emergency measures (one notes a parallel here with some provisions of the Patriot Act).

I want to mention some recent non-fictional, radicalization narratives that have generated substantial interest before moving on to fictional accounts in film and literature. *Why I left Jihad* by Walid Shoebat (2005); *The Islamist* by Ed Husain (2007); and *Radical: My Journey from Islamist Extremism to a Democratic Awakening* by Maajid Nawaz (2012). To this list of first-person narratives I would add *Zacarias, My Brother* by Abd Samad Moussaoui (2003), which, as the title implies, is a third-person account, that explores the radicalization of the alleged twentieth suicide bomber on 9/11, who did not participate in events of that day because he was in jail for a visa infraction.

As was the case with Böll’s *Katharina Blum*, the subtitles for these works are revealing:

*Why I left Jihad: The Root of Terrorism and the Rise of Islam by Ex-Muslim Terrorist Walid Shoebat* by Walid Shoebat

*The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside, and why I left* by Ed [Mohammed] Husain
Radical: My Journey from Islamist Extremism to a Democratic Awakening by Maajid Nawaz.

Zacarias, My Brother: The Making of a Terrorist by Abd Samad Moussaoui.

In all of these narratives, the protagonists must confront profound identity issues as a result of leaving their homelands: Walid Shoebat is born in Palestine, but goes to America; Ed Husain’s father is Indian, his mother Bangladeshi, but he grows up in the UK; Maajid Nawaz whose family is Pakistani, grows up in England; and Abd Moussaoui’s family is from Morocco but he grows up in France; as he observes, he was a Frenchman who wasn’t French and an Arab who couldn’t speak Arabic. All of the protagonists talk about linguistic and cultural issues as well as racism and class-based discrimination. The subtext of these narratives, as evidenced already in the subtitles, is repentance. In the title to an October 2012 Newsweek article on Maajid Nawaz by Christopher Dickey, Nawaz is even referred to as “The Repentant Radical.” The topic of repentance, however, renders these voices harmless; it defangs them. The process is parallel to ventriloquist Jeff Dunham’s puppet, “Achmed the Dead Terrorist.” Since the puppet is a skeleton, it can no longer threaten us, so Achmed gets away with all manner of outrageous comments. In a sense, these voices contribute to the phenomenon critiqued by Edward Said: they divert attention away from potential perpetrator responsibility in the form of state terrorism. I had hoped to be able to include the 2012 film The Repentant (El taab) by Algerian director Merzak Allouache, but I have not been able to see the film yet.

The autobiographical and biographical radicalization narratives offer insight into a world unknown to outsiders: radical Islamist circles. While they make compelling
reading, they are limited by their very factuality. To elaborate this, I turn to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, when he writes:

“The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse—indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in metre or not. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts” (Poetics 35). I take “poetry” here to be fantasy or fiction. I would like to turn now to the general truths that fictional works have to offer us about terrorist perpetrators and their radicalization.

An early example, dating from 1990, is *Troubled Souls*, a graphic novel, written by Garth Ennis and drawn by John McCrea. The first graphic novel to treat “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland, it melds history and trauma and is singularly lacking in what might be deemed heroic figures. Tom Boyd, one of the protagonists, is an apolitical coward, and the other Damien McWilliams, is an IRA thug. Although the comic focuses on the terrorist, politically-based violence in Northern Ireland, its approach feels very personal. We are offered the unusual perspective of a perpetrator and are exposed to the process by which an individual becomes a terrorist—a process that involves considerable soul searching. This fact would speak to Edward Said’s observation that terrorists are portrayed by their enemies as “ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake” (154). By contrast, Tom is repeatedly shown in agonizing debate with himself. He finds it necessary to reconstruct 800 years of Irish history as a justification for retaliatory violence. In one cell, he thinks:
“The Brits have been shafting Ireland for hundreds of years.” At the bottom of the same cell, his conscience interposes: “You’re tryin’ to justify doing what that bastard Damien wants and you’re pathetic” [emphasis in original] (Ennis/McCrea, np). Tom not only rues the deaths he caused by planting a bomb, but when he preemptively shoots Damien, his life is ruined and he flees to Britain. The final images are ones of loss, sadness, and futility. While Troubled Souls is not an anti-war or anti-terrorism book per se, it definitely undercuts any feelings of adventure, romanticism, or heroism associated with the IRA.

I want to turn to several suicide bomber narratives, as examples of the most extreme form of radicalization, and briefly comment on how the topic is treated in three films: The Terrorist (1999) an Indian film by Santosh Sivan, Paradise Now (2005) a Palestinian film by Hany Abu Assad, and The War Within (2005) a film made in the US by Joseph Costello dealing with a disillusioned Pakistani in America. In his 2013 book The Myth of Martyrdom, Adam Lankford argues that suicide bombers are individuals who are a priori disposed to commit suicide, that they were suicidal long before embracing a martyrdom assignment. The films and fictional texts on this subject suggest otherwise.

In both The Terrorist and The War Within flashbacks are carefully interspersed showing injustices and state brutality that would both explain and justify the protagonists’ decisions to become suicide bombers. In The Terrorist, Mali, the female protagonist, who is a Tamil resistance fighter, undergoes a slow transformation throughout the film and is pregnant by the end of the film. She decides in the last moment not to carry out the suicide bombing. A pronounced use of extreme close-ups
serves to “humanize” the protagonist, and the role is played by an appealing young actress, enhancing audience identification. *The War Within* has a different, more violent outcome in that the protagonist blows up Grand Central Station in New York. But the film carefully shows, through flashbacks, how he was kidnapped off the streets of Paris, was tortured and held prisoner by Western agents in an apparent case of mistaken identity. Finally, Hany Abu-Assad’s film *Paradise Now* takes a very complex approach to the topic of suicide bombings: characters are included who represent different viewpoints, both pro and contra. He also “splits the difference,” so to speak, highlighting individual differences, in that one of the two friends carries out the suicide bombing whereas the other does not. In the course of the film, the two practically reverse roles. As with the other two films, the protagonists are humanized by small revelations in their personalities and gently humorous scenes. One protagonist is also ascribed a justification for his martyrdom: his father was executed by Palestinians for having collaborated with the Israelis. The family lives in shame, and the son, Said, feels that he must atone for his father’s action. All of these works show the characteristics of previous narratives such as dysfunctional (or killed) families, discrimination, oppression, and hopelessness. Ruby Rich wrote in an essay “Bomb Culture,” “[Assad’s] film lays bare the logic of violence in the context of untenable oppression. The suicide bombing is revealed to have less to do with religious fervor than with family history and daily indignity. And here, at last, the appeal of fundamentalism and jihad becomes understandable: it makes something happen. In a life devoid of agency and possibility, it creates a narrative that has urgency and import, one that can go off with a bang” (Rich, *Sight & Sound* 29). Assad, the filmmaker, said in a 2005 *Cinéaste* interview, that
“the majority of people have one of two views on the suicide bombers: either the bombers are criminals or super-heroes. My film is about destroying those prevailing perceptions, those images, to build a new perception” (17). Assad elaborated on his goals with the film: “I hope they [the viewers] come out with a shock. This is what I wanted. . . . Every human should be shocked watching a movie that lights dark places. Film is about allowing you to go to places you will never go, to be persons that you will never be. . . . What we don’t know is the experience of the last twenty-four hours before people blow themselves up. So I wanted to light up that place” (17-18).

In addition to the protagonists, viewers also get intimate glimpses of the handlers in two of the films (Paradise Now, The Terrorist) and how they interact with the potential bombers.

9/11 might seem an unlikely context for a radicalization narrative, because any effort to understand or explain the hijackers’ motivations might be misconstrued as an attempt at justification. And yet, because of the enormity of the attacks and massive loss of life, there is interest in understanding, if possible, the underlying world view, perhaps in order to thwart future recurrences. Two 9/11 prequels delve into a fictionalized psychology of Mohammed Atta and Ziad Jarrah, two of the suicide bombers and attempt to illuminate why they turned to violent jihad and martyrdom. The first example is The Hamburg Cell, a 2004 UK made-for-television film directed by Antonia Bird. The film, which has been called both a “docu-drama” and a “semidocumentary,” centers on the recruitment and radicalization of Ziad Jarrah. The director commented: “Normally with my films, I try to make audiences feel. With this, I want them to think. We are talking about the forces shaping the 21st century. I hope it gives people a slightly new perspective and encourages us all to think just a little more deeply.”
Bird and Assad earlier, seem to embrace Brechtian pretensions with their films, leaning more toward instruction than toward entertainment. Although Martin Amis’ story, published in *The New Yorker* in April 2006 is entitled “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” the story also deals with Ziad Jarrah and with the odd alliance between these two very different men. Like Bird, who began with many documents, facts, and interviews, which she embellished for her film, Amis mixes known facts about Atta’s final hours with fictional expansion by imagining his thoughts and feelings. The story concludes with the statement: “On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 A.M., in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta’s last day began” (163). And thus the ending of the narrative is open to the future, having come full circle and recommencing once again, suggestive perhaps that events might one day be repeated.

I hope to have shown that radicalization and ensuing terrorism are, in each case, embedded geographically and temporally in a specific socio-political framework. The historical and geographical contexts serve not to justify terrorism but to help us understand the turn to political violence, the choice of jihad, even the choice of martyrdom. The motivations for embracing radical violence can be summarized as propinquity, personal experiences of discrimination, and broader social injustice. Significantly, these stand in direct opposition to explanations such as “terrorists don’t love freedom” or “terrorists are mentally unstable,” or reductive, binary analyses, in which one must be either for or against Western policies, with nothing in between. Radicalization narratives are provocative by their diversity and differences. They certainly offer us insights into places to which we would otherwise never have access,
as Hany Abu-Assad pointed out. Studying them, understanding them, and appreciating their cultural role in this new age of terrorism is both timely and necessary.