

Perspective: Islamic murder in Netherlands strikes blow against free speech

By JAMES STROCK

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Imagine that Michael Moore or Oliver Stone or another controversial filmmaker were brutally murdered in broad daylight in Greenwich Village after the release of a work criticizing the way Islamic fundamentalists treat women.

It hasn't happened in the United States, but gruesome reality has taken bloody revenge on art and imagination in, of all places, tranquil and tolerant Amsterdam.

On Nov. 2 -- the day on which Americans were preoccupied with our solemn ritual of national elections -- a young Muslim fanatic struck a blow at Western freedom of expression.

Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was gunned down as he rode his bicycle in Amsterdam that morning. He was murdered by a young Islamist radical who approached his quarry from behind, emptying a pistol into his crumpling body at point-blank range.

Ignoring van Gogh's pleas for mercy, the killer slashed his target's throat with such force that he was nearly decapitated. He then plunged the knife into van Gogh's warm, blood-soaked body, affixing a lengthy letter of grievance against Dutch society in general, and several Jewish and apostate Muslim politicians in particular.

Amsterdam is among the world's most beautiful cities, one in which people may experience freedom scarcely conceivable elsewhere. Bicycles clutter the clean streets, prostitutes beckon from windows, pungent aromas of cannabis waft in the breeze -- all amid a powerful entrepreneurial economy and in the shadow of the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

In a city where young mothers can often be seen unselfconsciously pushing strollers in public parks late into the evening, there is a sense of violation in such a brazen crime. There is also a rising sense that the Muslim perpetrators of such outrages see their acts not as crimes but as part of a war.

Van Gogh, a distant descendant of the painter Vincent van Gogh, was a provocative filmmaker who knowingly offended militant Islamic sensibilities in his recent film, "Submission," which highlighted physical, emotional and spiritual abuse of Islamic women. The martyrdom of van Gogh for free expression has, ironically, made the film much more widely viewed than likely otherwise. It can be seen at www.ifilm.com.

It is perhaps not surprising that van Gogh was reportedly working on a new project, concerning the life and death of the late Dutch political leader Pim Fortuyn.

Fortuyn, dismissed by opponents as a right-wing extremist in the mold of the Austrian neo-Nazi Jorg Haider, was assassinated by a left-wing extremist in 2002. Like van Gogh, Fortuyn embodied freedom and self-expression to an extent that could test the tolerance of some and strike fear into others.

From a conservative background, Fortuyn was physically imposing, dynamic, invariably stylishly dressed, highly articulate, a former professor, author and a defiantly open homosexual who did not hesitate to provoke controversy.

Fortuyn gave voice to concerns about the rising conflict between the Netherlands' culture of freedom -- including gay marriage, regulated prostitution and drug use, and euthanasia -- and the rising political demands of Islamic groups seeking to impose their own norms. With approximately a million Muslims in the Netherlands, these questions are not merely hypothetical.

Fortuyn's campaign platform sought to reconcile these cross-currents through integrating Islamic fundamentalist groups.

"Cultural developments diametrically opposed to deserved integration and emancipation, such as arranged marriages, clan vendettas and female circumcision, must be combated by legislation and public information," he contended.

It is noticeable that van Gogh's murder has not prompted a public outcry among American literary and Hollywood figures. Perhaps they have been preoccupied facing down imaginary threats to free expression from the Bush administration.

Yet no one should miss the implications. While any particular criminal perpetrator can be marginalized, it would be at once patronizing and self-deluding not to take seriously the broader political cause of which they are a part.

The Netherlands is not the "Great Satan"; it has only 1,300 troops in Iraq -- and they are set to depart in early 2005. And it is not the economic, military, political and cultural colossus whose very existence can be viewed as an aggression against Islamic fundamentalism.

The rambling letter pinned to van Gogh's body stated, "I know definitely that you, Oh America, will go down." Despite what we might wish, the strike against our shared values of freedom in the Netherlands is also a strike against our way of life.

James Strock, a senior fellow at San Francisco's Pacific Research Institute, is a member of the Committee on the Present Danger. Readers may write him at CPD, 1146 19th Street NW, Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20036, or e-mail him at jms@jamesstrock.com.