

# The Strange Death of Theo Van Gogh

by [Robert Bruce](#) (July 2017)



Little Dutch Boy safeguarding the essential. *(Artwork built on the work of Marguerite Scott)*



## Prelude

Surveying the life's work of Theo Van Gogh it is difficult not to read into it metaphors of civilisational decline. A distant relative of the great Artist, he had built his modest acclaim slumming the lowest reaches of 21st-century Prolefeed and, by his late thirties, he had exhausted even this cheap line of scatological obsessions. If in the '80s, a film like *Luger*, with its leaden script and graphic scenes of torture porn (the film's *piece de la resistance* is a gun being fired up the vagina of a disabled girl), had caused a modest stir when it debuted at the Amsterdam film festival, he soon paid the price for peaking so early. Like Andres Serrano after highly controversial "Piss Christ," any subsequent production could only be an anti-climax and, as a low-rent pornographer, he was well aware of the diminishing returns to be had from pushing obscenity in a sacrilegious age. Playing epater bourgeoisie in a shameless age is hard work and for most of the post-war period the Netherlands flaunted its decadence with an élan that would have appalled any self-respecting bohemian. In such societies, conspicuous morality is the ultimate transgression and, if the Dutch had lost a sense of the sacred generations ago, its first brushes with Islam in the '90s were confronting them with challenges they had not grappled with for centuries. Here was a faith which had taboos in droves and, if van Gogh had inherited none of his ancestor's talents, he had courage enough to play Voltaire. Insults flew, threats multiplied and soon he was acquiring the kind of enemies any civilised man would be proud to acquire.

Following raucous TV encounters with the likes of high profile Islamist Abou Jabah and a stream of publications like "Allah

knows Best,” he was attracting enough death threats to prompt an offer of close protection from the Dutch security and intelligence services. Undaunted and doubtless underwhelmed (the AIVD had been watching Pym Fortuyn, hardly a promising portent), van Gogh pressed on and, in September 2004, he teamed up with Dutch Somali feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to produce his final daring blasphemy.

*Submission*, an amateurish piece of agitprop featuring a naked woman with the offending verses of the Koran projected onto her body, was definitely a step up from the usual profanities, but van Gogh, always more concerned with Hirsi Ali’s safety than his own, retained an uncharacteristic modesty around his achievements. He after all was ‘just the village idiot’. She was an infidel—an infinitely weightier offence at least in the abstract—and, when he set off for work on his bike on the 4th November, he was blissfully unaware of his impending martyrdom.

The very public disembowelment by an Islamist petty criminal in central Amsterdam is by now well-known and the warped *mens rea* scarcely requires more elaboration than Mohamed Boyeri left pinned to van Gogh’s corpse. The response to this declaration of war on the other hand is so suggestive of the Vichy syndrome afflicting European elites that it needs to be revisited constantly.

## **Canary in the Mine**

As a modish trendsetter for enlightened opinion, the Netherlands, with its long-haired soldiers and militarised

social workers, is a symbol of the kind of politically correct Utopia British Left wingers salivate over. No country could be more conspicuously tolerant. And its rise, at the expense of pious counter-enlightenment Spain, offers a ready-made morality tale for those proselytising the benefits of open borders and open minds.

Spain got its xenophobic piety and virtuous poverty, the Netherlands got its stock exchange and Spinoza and this blend of pragmatism and principle provided the Netherlands with all the advantages nature denied her. A rebel waterlogged province in the 16th century, she was a global trading superpower by the 17th and anyone harbouring any doubts on the benefits of their broadmindedness is likely to have them silenced by Amsterdam's skyline, a stunning tribute to the Northern Renaissance in a country which knew it had not become rich by peering too fastidiously into men's souls.

All the same, tolerance as conviction, forced upon individuals by the fear of impiously pre-empting grace, is a different beast to tolerance as timid indifference and the history of the Netherlands is at least in part a story of personal piety and republican virtue yielding to a less heroic spirit. Much as its Calvinist patriarchs might have feared, abstention bred riches and avarice drove out virtue. After the excesses of a literally burning conviction, enlightened self-interest could do the heavy lifting and, in a country where institutions have been designed above all to prevent the intrusion of strong beliefs into public life, this enfeebling of the collective conscience has been particularly pronounced.

The Netherlands notoriously had a bad war and, when confronted with their second instalment of barbarism, they responded with

similar prudence. That anyone should forfeit their life for a film was doubtless a terrible thing but (there is always a “but”), for many, the most important lesson to be learned was the need to choose one’s taboos carefully. The Justice Minister, Piet Hein Donner (of whom more later), had few doubts; his proposed reintroduction of Blasphemy set the tone perfectly.

“If the opinions have a potentially damaging effect on society, the government must act. It is not about religion specifically, but any harmful comments in general.”

Van Gogh had pierced the squeamish sensibilities of this most conscience-stricken of nations and, in a climate where the right not-to-be-offended enjoys parity of esteem with the rights of free expression, many of the respectable liberal outlets were prepared to bend the knee.

Founded to stand sentinel over the liberties of Europe, the ostensibly nonpartisan *Index on Censorship* had in fact imbibed so much of Marxisant of the counter culture, that its columnist Rohan Jayasekera could openly snigger at anyone who thought its mission was the protection of Mill’s sole dissenting voice. As he told the British journalist Nick Cohen, this may have been its original youthful purpose, but it was now more concerned with combatting hate crime and, having served up the alibi, he did his worst—penning a sordid attack on a ‘free speech fundamentalist’ who had abused his freedom of speech.

What was his death, after all, if not a sensational climax to

a lifetime's public performance? Stabbed and shot by a bearded fundamentalist, a message from the killer pinned by a dagger to his chest, Theo van Gogh became a martyr to free expression. His passing was marked by a magnificent barrage of noise as Amsterdam hit the streets to celebrate him in the way the man himself would have truly appreciated. And what timing! Just as his long-awaited biographical film of Pym Fortuyn's life was ready to screen. Bravo, Theo! Bravo!

Strong beer—and enough to trigger some noisy disavowals by the editors—but even if few others debased themselves with quite such élan, there were plenty others willing to see van Gogh's soft-core porn as a greater crime than his public disembowelment. For Geert Mak, the travel writer cum house historian of the Dutch Left liberal establishment, *Submission* was on a par with Goebbels' notorious *Eternal Jew* and, having effectively invoked the Hitler argument, went on to indulge the inner *de haut en bas* of the Dutch: *lumpenintelligentsia*. Unlike the dignified response of Spaniards to the Madrid bombings, he says, “we have only one murder, and everybody goes crazy,” a spasm attributable in large part to the growing pains of a new society . A ‘relatively provincial Netherlands’ (where on earth had Mak been looking?) was opening up to the rest of the world, and the Dutch needed to get used to the trade-offs necessary in a multicultural society. Many, needless to say, have taken the hint and the adjustments made to facts on the ground are clear to see. Amsterdam, as even its proudly ‘out’ mayor Jobs Cohen would concede, is becoming markedly less camp with each passing year, and it cannot be very long before the remnants of its Jewish population make a final choice between anonymity and emigration—an insidious dilemma placed on them by a thousand exorcisms of the liberal mind.

Some truths are literally unthinkable and the Dutch liberal establishment has gone to more trouble than most in pedalling the polite urban myths of multiculturalism. Anyone with eyes to see is aware of what lies behind the record number of attacks on gays for example but, even when confronted with the unpalatable facts, liberal opinion formers sought refuge in some unnecessarily complicated plot twists. The attackers, as the University of Amsterdam 'Offender Study' concluded, may have been mostly North African Muslims but clearly many were committed by men with 'conflicted sexual identities'-a hypothesis which is hardly reassuring to the victims at least enabled Cohen to move the issue beyond a clash of civilisations to therapeutic sound bites.

How many are really convinced by this is questionable, to say the least, and one wonders if Muslims are impressed by the transition from homophobes to homosexuals; but here at least they identified the culprits. With the Jews they elided even this detail. When the *European Parliament's Racism and Xenophobia Monitoring Centre* published its report on anti-Semitic violence, it was summarising in strangled academic argot what any Dutch policemen knew—not least those running decoy Jews in the salubrious parts of the inner city. But when the commission suddenly discovered methodological errors and realised that the culprits were mostly neo Nazis, few dared raise the elementary questions and no one was more willing to [connive in the doublethink](#) than Cohen who, as a gay Jew, perhaps felt discretion was the better part of valour.

All this is boundlessly depressing and smug liberals who sniff at Trump's war against grammar would do well to remember the kind of doublethink that sophisticated Europeans have been indulging in for decades. Freedom of speech, needless to say, is still a good thing but, like most things, it can be pushed

to extremes. It is through sleights of hand like this that the likes of Cohen have debased the substance of these basic values. So much talk of the “golden mean” just masks the underlying lack of conviction: If an idea is not good in the extreme case, it is simply a bad idea and only someone with the most awry of moral compasses and a deaf ear to Barry Goldwater would claim moderation in defence of freedom-is-a-virtue. We once would have called this cowardice and, in this respect, the Dutch are in good company.

If Europeans can agree on anything it is the evil of conflict, an aversion to megalothymia so engraved in the European psyche that pop Marxist philosophers have elevated it to a symbol of national purpose. The following passages by John Stuart Mill and Jurgen Habermas tell you all you need to know about Europe’s spiritual malaise.

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself. (J. S. Mill, *The Contest in America*, 1862)

What forms the common core of the European identity is the character of the painful learning process it has gone through as much as its results. It is the lasting memory of nationalist excess and moral abyss that lends our present commitments the quality of a peculiar achievement. This historical background should ease the transition to a



post-national democracy based on the mutual recognition of the differences between strong and proud national cultures. Neither assimilation nor coexistence—in the sense of pale *modus vivendi*—are appropriate terms for our history of learning how to construct new and ever more sophisticated forms of ‘solidarity amongst strangers.’ Today, moreover, all European nation states are being brought together by the challenges which they all face equally. All are in the process of becoming countries of immigration and multicultural societies. All are exposed to an economic and cultural globalisation that awakes memories of a shared history of conflict and reconciliation—and of a comparatively low threshold of toleration towards exclusion. (Jurgen Habermas, “Why Europe Needs a Constitution,” *New Left Review*, 2001)

Can anyone read these statements and the embodied sensibilities and not detect a fading grandeur in the sentiments of the 21st century?

## **Enlightenment Fundamentalists**

To judge by the tone of the abuse heaped on Hirsi Ali, one might have thought she was little more than a narcissist with a cause. Geert Mak’s heavily laden *nom de guerres* of Somali princess and his tasteless diatribes on her Joan of Arc complex typified the sneering tone of so many progressive commentators who might reasonably have been expected to offer succour. But perhaps the most tasteless attacks related to the question of her bodyguards.

By any stretch of the imagination these were not frivolous accessories and, after van Gogh had paid the price for his modesty, a civilised government might have seen them as a necessary part of the state's compact with its citizens. Even here, however, freedom of speech was weighed in the balance and, in a particularly shameful act of parsimony, the Justice Ministry announced the withdrawal of funding for her security detail leaving her with few options other than flight to the New World, the first refugee from Western Europe since the holocaust.

It is a sordid episode in the history of post-war Europe and even now it is difficult to credit the witch's brew of vicious resentments stirred by someone who in saner times would have been hailed as a progressive feminist icon. Much of the explanation inevitably lies in the narcissism of small differences but some of it, too, is clearly driven by the joys of hatred.

To a well-bred ideologue operating in the starched and humourless atmosphere of the Left, with all its aborted thoughts and anxious taboos, is to be in the position of someone permanently hoarding their vengeance. All they need is the necessary cover and Hirsi Ali-like Zionist bogeymen, and vacant railway carriages provide it in spades. Everything she has done in her subsequent incarnation—from nesting in neo-con think tanks to marrying an unfashionably Right-wing historian—has fired this indignation and nowhere have these heights of psychological self-indulgence reached a grimmer frenzy than amongst genteel intellectuals.

As a piece of character assassination, Ian Buruma's "Death in Amsterdam" has few equals; its distinctively vindictive tone

sharpened by a penchant for Soviet-style genealogies designed to paint Hirsi Ali as an emotionally scarred and unsophisticated zealot. Much of it is merely tasteless; readers will draw their own conclusions as to why Buruma felt compelled to linger on the death of Hirsi Ali's sister or her childhood infatuation with Danielle Steele novels, but the real purpose of these creepy *ad hominem*s is revealed in a relentless deconstruction of western values. Thus, amongst other canards, the suggestion that, Ayaan, "having succumbed to fundamentalist influences in her youth similar traits could be detected in her conversion to a 'slightly simplistic Enlightenment fundamentalist.'" "

"Enlightenment fundamentalist." Now, there is an arresting oxymoron. It is difficult to credit that Buruma, an accomplished Sovietologist and keen student of the kind of persuasive definitions communists used to debase language and meaning, did not know what he was doing with this sinister neologism but, even if one were inclined to be generous, further passages give enough context to dismiss the idea of a slip of the pen. Thus, at first sight, the class values appear to be straightforward—on the one hand, secularism, science, equality between men and women, Individualism, freedom to criticise without fear of violent retribution and, on the other, divine laws, revealed truth, male domination, tribal honour, and so on. It is indeed hard to see how, in a liberal democracy, these contrasting values can be reconciled. How could one not be on the side of Fritz Bolkstein, Afshin Elian, or Ayaan Hirsi Ali?

Ian Baruma writes in *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limit of Tolerance*:

A closer look reveals fissures that are less straightforward. People come to the struggle for Enlightenment values from very different angles and, even when they find common ground, their aims may be less than enlightened.

. . . struggling against oppressive cultures that force genital mutilation on young girls, and marriage with strangers on young women. The bracing air of universalism is a release from tribal traditions.

and

. . . But the same could be said, in a way, of their greatest enemy: the modern holy warrior, like the killer of Theo van Gogh. The young Moroccan-Dutch youth downloading English translations of Arabic texts from the Internet, is also looking for a universal cause, severed from cultural and tribal specificities.

And for light relief, a personal favourite of Hirsi Ali's, fellow apostate Afshin Ellian, with comment (via Buruma) that might have graced *Private Eye's* "Pseuds Corner" column.

*Why should Westerners be the only ones to dissent from their traditions, he wondered. "Why not us? It is racist to think that Muslims are too backward to think for themselves."* He spoke with passion, and more than a hint of fury. I admired his passion, but there was something unnerving about his fury, something that reminded me of Huzinga's idea that dangerous illusions come from a sense of historical wrong. (Buruma, see above)

This is, to be sure, not quite an endorsement but one wonders at the obsessive even-handedness. The effect of Buruma's first two paragraphs—when one gets away from all the polite double negatives—is to put the two belief systems on the same moral plane. All this, and Buruma's obsequies to Ramadan, should have alerted agile minds to the mischief of the phrase "Enlightenment fundamentalist" but, in a review of *Murder in Amsterdam*, Timothy Garton Ash chose to give it a second tawdry outing and for good measure threw in few calumnies of his own.

Sniffing his way condescendingly through an article, which predictably ended with a warning against simplistic parodies of Islam, Ash took care to point out that Ayaan had won the glamour award adding (in case there was any doubt), "If she had been short, squat, and squinting, her story and views might not be so closely attended to." Nice. The war of words sparked by Ash's ungallant column is by now knowledge, courtesy of Paul Berman's racy polemic *The Flight of the Intellectuals: The Controversy Over Islamism and the Press*, something of a cause celebre—a series of increasingly ill-tempered exchanges between Pascal Bruckner, Timothy Garton Ash, and Buruma—raging across the pages of German periodical "Sign and Sight." Bruckner's point was a simple one: whilst leaving themselves free to savour the bracing freedoms of citizens-of-the-world, both nevertheless looked disapprovingly on Hirsi Ali's apostasy. She had, as both of them sniffed, left her community, and lost her ability to speak to the people of Brick Lane and, hidden in the purple prose, was the subtext that she should have stuck to her millet. To Bruckner, a quintessentially French republican intellectual-cum-moralist, this was more than the condescension of compassion, it was 'the racism of anti-racists' and screamed for vengeance.

Bruckner wrote:

Under the guise of celebrating diversity, veritable ethnic or confessional prisons are established, where one group of citizens is denied the advantages of another. Nothing is missing from the portrait of the young woman painted by Timothy Garton Ash, not even an outmoded machismo. In his eyes, only the beauty and glamour of the Dutch parliamentarian can explain her media success; not the accuracy of what she says. Garton Ash does not ask whether the fundamentalist theologian Tariq Ramadan, to whom he sings enflamed panegyrics, also owes his fame to his Playboy looks. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, it is true, does elude current stereotypes of political correctness. As a Somali, she proclaims the superiority of Europe over Africa. As a woman, she is neither wife nor mother. As a Muslim, she openly denounces the backwardness of the Koran. So many flouted clichés make her a true rebel, unlike the sham insurgents our societies produce by the dozen. It is her wilful, short-fused, enthusiastic, impervious side to which Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash object, in the spirit of the Inquisitors who saw devil-possessed witches in every woman too flamboyant for their tastes.

A mighty sword had flashed in its scabbard and by the time Bruckner's missive hit the press he was already in good company. The flower of France's *New Intellectuals* had piled into the affray with *j'accuse* outrage and were joined poignantly by the former East German dissident Ulrike Ackermann who hurled well-earned criticism at her fellow travellers and former friends, Buruma and Ash. For someone like Ash, an honourable Cold Warrior whatever his faults, that must have been a wounding reproach, but he fearlessly returned to the fray in an article in the *Guardian* which for sheer

tenacity of purpose is second to none.

Having blundered into a theological minefield, Ash had taken it upon himself to dig deeper into those subtleties of Islam which, in his view, were beyond the reach of an untutored Somali. He had become infatuated with Sheikh Gamal al Banna (elder brother of Hassan al Banna), 'a man of tranquil clarity' and the possessor of a library which evidently made quite an impression on the intrepid Don. Al Banna was, on the face of it, just the kind of interlocutor who a liberal would seek out when striving to avoid a "simplistic parody of the real diversity of Islam." He held progressive views on the stoning of adulterers and apostasy; he prefers to anathematise (it is surely a symptom of how low we have fallen that Garton Ash hails this as a new humanism) rather than kill, "and yet he is something Hirsi Ali can never be: a pious Muslim with the ability to reach millions." Warming to a familiar theme, he laid out two quotations on hadiths—one that had been provided by Hirsi Ali and one provided by Gamal al Banna—before asking his readers, "Which do you think reveals a deeper historical knowledge of Islam? Which is more likely to encourage thoughtful Muslims in the view that they can be both good Muslims and good citizens of free societies?"

The question evidently only had to be asked to be answered: how could a devourer of Mills and Boon ever hope to compete in the arts of sacred exegesis with such a cultivated scholar? One could sense the purring contentment as he penned his lapidary comments. How could one come back from this *tour de force*?

It was an incautious endorsement and, at the time he offered up his burnt offering to the *Guardian*, hubris was already beating its wings. The worldly Professor had published his

piece on the same day that the Middle East media research unit had published a less flattering summary of the sheikh and the reading was sobering.

About 9/11, for example, Sheikh Gamal Al-Banna [here](#).

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