

**PHILO  
SOPHY &  
SOCIAL  
CRITICI  
SM**

vol 29 no 1 2003



SAGE Publications  
ISSN 0041-4537

## EDITOR

David M. Rasmussen  
Boston College

**BOARD OF  
CONSULTING  
EDITORS**

Douglas Allen  
James Bernauer  
Oliva Blanchette  
Remo Bodei  
James Bohman  
Hauke Brunkhorst  
Jean Cohen  
Robert Cohen  
Drucilla Cornell  
Simon Critchley  
Jodi Dean  
Maurizio Passerin  
d'Entrèves  
Alessandro Ferrara

Joseph Flanagan  
Bernard Flynn  
Rainer Forst  
William C. Gay  
Helga Geyer-Ryan  
Garth Gillan  
William Griffith  
Agnes Heller  
Axel Honneth  
Dick Howard  
Robert Innis  
Richard Kearney  
Peter Kemp  
Gertrude Koch  
Michiel Korthals  
Ernesto Laclau  
Cristina Lafont  
Thomas McCarthy

Christoph Menke  
Chantal Mouffe  
Lucius Outlaw  
Thomas Owens  
W. Creighton Peden  
Jacques Poulain  
Paul Ricoeur  
Yves Sintomer  
Tracey Stark  
Svetozar Stojanovic  
James Swindal  
Jacques Taminiaux  
Carlos Thiebaut  
Ivan Vejvoda  
Arne Johan Verlesen  
Stephen White  
Kurt Wolff

*Philosophy & Social Criticism* (ISSN 0191-4537) is published six times a year (in January, March, May, July, September and November – issues 1–6) by SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi).

Annual Subscription Rates (6 issues) 2003: full rate (includes electronic version) £414/US\$662; reduced individual rate: £47/US\$75. Full rate subscriptions include the right for members of the subscribing institution to access the electronic content of the journal at no extra charge from Sage. The content can be accessed online through a number of electronic journal intermediaries, who may charge for access. Full details available on our website: [www.sagepublications.com/ejournals](http://www.sagepublications.com/ejournals).

Student discounts, single issue rates and advertising details are available from SAGE Publications Ltd, 6 Bonhill Street, London EC2A 4PU, UK.

Tel: +44 (0)20 7374 0645; fax: +44 (0)20 7374 8741

[email: [subscription@sagepub.co.uk](mailto:subscription@sagepub.co.uk); website: [www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)]; and in North America from SAGE Publications Ltd, PO Box 5096, Thousand Oaks, CA 91359, USA.

Copyright © 2003 SAGE Publications Ltd. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, and only as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the above-mentioned address.

Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough.

Printed in the UK by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, on acid-free paper (conforming to ANSI Z39.48-1984).

Periodicals postage is paid at Rahway, NJ. *Postmaster*, send address corrections to *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, c/o Mercury Airfreight International Ltd, 365 Blair Road, Avenel, NJ 07001, USA.

Information for contributors is to be found on the inside back cover.

**Richard Kearney**

## **Terror, philosophy and the sublime**

### **Some philosophical reflections on 11 September**

**Abstract** This article begins by posing the question: how can we understand the 'terror' of 11 September? First, a brief discussion of the reactions, both psychological and political, provides a background for establishing the particular character of this act of terror as being both inside and outside, simultaneously. The pairing of 'us' and 'them' in inextricable struggle reminds us of the role monsters have always played in putting a face on the radical alterity of the Other. Second, the experience of terror is examined from three distinct philosophical positions: the fatalism of Baudrillard, the sublime of Kant, and the political of Arendt. Third, a discussion of the media and the role of the viewer of the Event of 11 September ends the discussion. In conclusion, it is suggested that the three ways of responding to the monstrous – practical understanding, working through and pardoning – may provide the best ways to help us empathize with our fellow human beings, which ultimately may move us to a fuller imaginative understanding.

**Key words** Al Qaeda · Arendt · Baudrillard · Kant · monsters

How can we understand the 'terror' of 11 September? Three days after the events, on 14 September, I visited an exhibition in the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts entitled 'Terrors and Wonders: Monsters in Contemporary Art'. Almost one week later again, on 19 September, I gave a graduate seminar in Boston College on a number of tentative philosophical approaches to this limit-experience which for so many has split our world into 'before' and 'after'. On 10 October I visited Ground Zero in New York. Combining some reflections that

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM · vol 29 no 1 · pp. 23–51

Copyright © 2003 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)

[0191-4537(200301)29:1;23–51;029831]

**PSC**

emerged during those days of puzzlement, I will try to suggest here some ways in which we might begin, however provisionally, to address the radical challenge to our understanding posed by 11 September. I make this attempt with Spinoza's maxim in mind: 'Do not complain, do not rejoice, try to understand.'<sup>1</sup>

### I In the wake of terror

First let me situate the event in the context of some immediate reactions by those who suffered the attack – the Americans – and those who allegedly perpetrated it – the Al Qaeda.

The initial response of President Bush was to divide the world into good and evil. In the days immediately following the terror, he declared a 'crusade' against the evil scourge of terrorism. He cited his Second World War predecessor, President Roosevelt, invoking the 'warm courage of unity' that possesses a nation at war. And reaching further back into the history of American warfare, Bush quoted the famous Wild West phrase: that the outlaw (Bin Laden) should be brought in 'dead or alive'. There was much use of religious idioms of apocalypse and purgation. The term 'sacrifice' was frequently heard and the military campaign launched against the enemy was initially called 'Campaign Infinite Justice' (later altered, because offensive to Muslims, to 'Enduring Freedom'). War had been declared and everyone, as Bush made plain, had to 'take sides'. For the 'civilized' or the 'barbarians'; for the innocent or the damned; for the courageous or the 'cowards'.

Most mainstream media responded in kind. Images of apocalypse were commonplace. One commentator spoke of the attackers as many-headed beasts whose tentacles were threatening to violate every secure space in the Nation. Another invoked the image of a fearsome incubus invading the free world. Idioms of virus, poison, disease and contamination were variously deployed to express the sense of an omnipresent menace – especially when the terror *from* the air was accompanied by terror *in* the air: the fear of anthrax, smallpox and other agents of biochemical destruction. Fear filtered through the nation. Yet the flip-side of this was a phenomenal upsurge of patriotic fervour evidenced in the proliferation of star-spangled banners and typified in the 24 September cover headline of *Time* magazine – 'ONE NATION, *Indivisible*'. This sentiment was emotively evoked in an anonymous street poem written over a picture of the US flag which I saw posted to a store window situated right beside Ground Zero in New York. Entitled 'We Are One', it read:

We've seen the devastation  
We know what has been done

And yet we've come together  
To STAND UP AND BE ONE.

We stand behind our Country  
We stand behind our Faith  
And Pray that in our Future  
Our Flag will stand and Wave.

President Bush reinforced this notion of a war between Civilization and its enemies when he delivered a broadcast address on 8 November, wrapping with this rousing military summons: 'We wage a war to save Civilization itself. . . . We have our marching orders. Fellow Americans, Let's Roll!' (The fact that the final phrase cites the last words of the heroic passenger who took on the terrorists before the fourth hijacked plane crashed in Pennsylvania on 11 September, speaks volumes.)

The Al Qaeda responded in even more emphatically apocalyptic terms. The issue was not in doubt – religious war. In messages broadcast on Al-Jazeera satellite television, Bin Laden summoned all Muslims to embrace the ultimate battle between Good and Evil, demonizing America as the Great Satan and Israel as the Little Satan. He called on the Islamic faithful throughout the world to join a Jihad or holy war (the traditional Islamic counter-term to Crusade) and denounced the American campaign against the Taliban as a 'terrorist Christian crusade'. Bin Laden went on to castigate the Pakistan government for 'standing beneath the Christian banner', provoking widescale riots in that country and prompting thousands of Pakistani tribesmen to cross over the border to join the Taliban. Al Qaeda insisted that any Muslim who supported the US-led military alliance in any way was 'an apostate of Islam'. And one found many propaganda statements replete with references to the USA and its allies as monsters, dragons and other demonic beasts who need to be purged from the earth through acts of sacrificial violence, so that the world may be made holy again.

In both these rhetorics – though I am not proposing a moral equivalency here – we witness a disturbing tendency to endorse the dualist thesis that divides the world schismatically into West and East. This echoes the 'Clash of Civilizations' scenario, famously outlined by Samuel Huntington in the summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, subsequently developed and republished as a best-selling book in 1996. Here one finds a personification of the West versus Islam dichotomy, making for what Edward Said has called a 'cartoonlike world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary'. Such caricature totally ignores the plurality, complexity and interdependence of each civilization.<sup>2</sup> A crude mythico-religious terminology of pure versus impure takes precedence over a more reasoned discourse about justice

and injustice. (It must be said, of course, that in spite of the dualist metaphors, the US government went to considerable lengths after Bush's 'Crusade' gaffe to make clear that this was *not* a war against Islam. So doing they were concurring with the wise counsel of intellectuals like Alan Wolfe that 'The more we think that what is at stake is a clash of civilizations, the more like our enemy we become'.<sup>3</sup>)

But to the extent that such rhetorics promulgate the notion of religious war, it has to be admitted that this is religious war with a *difference*. That is to say, it is a postmodern religious war. First, as even Secretary Rumsfeld himself admitted, this would *not* be just a conventional war fought with tanks and bombs but a cyberwar fought with computers and information flows. In short, it would be a credit war: a war of credit cards, credit transfers and above all credibility in the sense of belief and persuasion. A war of psycho-propaganda (Psy-Ops). 'The uniforms of this conflict will be bankers' pinstripes and programmers' grunge just as assuredly as desert camouflage,' said Rumsfeld. 'Even the vocabulary of this war will be different. When we "invade the enemy's territory", we may well be invading his cyberspace. There may not be as many beachheads stormed as opportunities denied.' (Echoes here, curiously, of Jean Baudrillard's thesis that contemporary war is TV war.)

But if the battle was shifting from hardware to software, as it increasingly virtualized and immaterialized the weapons of engagement, it was also shifting from a battle conducted exclusively on foreign territory – like all of America's interstate wars since 1812 – to one also fought *within* US national territory. With the alarming introduction of so-called 'weaponized' anthrax, an almost invisible toxin of corrosion and death, the Pentagon was compelled to 'shuffle its command' (as a front-page headline in the *Boston Globe* put it on 27 October). The military spotlight was now on 'home soil'. This division of the battle into 'overseas' and 'domestic' had radical repercussions. Once again, Secretary Rumsfeld had to change gears, appointing a pair of military commanders with additional responsibilities for defending US territory and considering the option of a permanent 'homeland' defense command. Up to this, the US military's defense focus was on guarding the borders and protecting the country from *external* threats. But this response to the unprecedented threat of bio-terrorism sparked a nervous debate in Washington over the extent to which the active-duty military should be involved in domestic 'civil defence'.

In short, war against terror was now being fought both inside and outside the national borders. And in the process borderlines themselves were becoming blurred and undecidable. The Minotaur, the horror, evil itself, was now within 'US' – inhaled like imperceptible spores of anthrax into the body politic – as well as 'somewhere out there', in THEM. Moreover, the difficulty of tracking down the culprits in their

cellars or caves – due to the continuing elusiveness of the enemy – was further exacerbating the sense of uncanny anxiety. Al Qaeda was proving to be as invasive as anthrax itself – with hijacked planes sliding into buildings like ‘letters into postboxes’. This was a war (in significant part) of disturbingly protean substances: a deadly game of smoke and mirrors. Nightly TV images showed grey fumes still smouldering from the subterranean bowels of Ground Zero (one famous shot even suggesting a demonic visage in the smoke) or rising up from the bombarded front-lines of the Taliban. While the mirrors became the Bush–Bin Laden game of satellite images and counter-images, bouncing back and forth across the air-waves. The war of terror had indeed entered the digital realms of cyberspace.

In a curious echo of the choral ode of *Antigone* on uncanniness, the postmodern warrior had found himself trapped in a labyrinthine web: ‘with no way out [*aporos*] he comes to nothing’.<sup>4</sup>

## II Monstrous arts

So how does this sense of uncanny terror relate, if at all, to the ‘Terrors and Wonders’ exhibition featuring different representations of monsters in contemporary art? One of the first things that struck me as I wandered through the corridors of the DeCordova museum in New England was that Bin Laden had many prototypes, stretching back to the very beginning of time and continuing to obsess the human imagination in our own age. Some of these were ‘real’ and some ‘imaginary’.

Real monsters, as several exhibits revealed, were generally considered ‘freaks of nature’ (*lusus naturae*), examples of nature gone wrong, as in congenital mutants, human dwarfs and giants, conjoined twins, hermaphrodites, hydrocephalics, children born with deformities such as two heads or three eyes, and so on. This category of ‘real’ monsters also included examples of psychically impaired ‘madmen’. And in most of these cases, the so-called deviants were wont to provoke sentiments of both revulsion and fascination. For, as Michel Foucault demonstrated in his celebrated example of the ship of fools in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity*, ‘civilized’ society could confirm its own sense of unitary consensus by virtue of its contemplation of outcasts. Men were men because they were *not* monsters.<sup>5</sup>

Where real monsters were neither proficient nor sufficient, imaginary ones were invented. These latter, the exhibition suggested, were far more common in that human imagination has a propensity to create hybrid perversions of nature. The most fascinating kind of monster is that which confuses nature’s categories by mixing up body parts or crossing human with animal features. (Exhibits at DeCordova included

chimeras with lion-heads and goat-bodies, centaurs with human faces and stag-like torsos, or Frankensteins and Golems constructed with organs from different beings.) Imaginary monsters are also constructed by grotesquely mutating certain human or animal features as in the Cyclops or the many-headed Hydra, King Kong or the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park. And, finally, there was the very common creation of monsters that are explicitly unreal and unearthly – namely, aliens and extra-terrestrials of various kinds.<sup>6</sup>

What the DeCordova exhibition brought graphically home is that monsters are metaphors of our anxiety. They correspond to our confusion about our genesis – the fact that we derive from autochthonous origins, regardless of how much we have evolved. Our rational consciousness is forever haunted by unconscious demons. Which may explain why most great mythologies invoke some foundational story of a struggle with a monster – Theseus and the Minotaur, Herakles and Hydra, Yahweh and Leviathan, Christ and Satan. But the atavistic demon we disinherit is also the double we never fully leave behind. And as writers, film-makers, TV producers, toy manufacturers and cyber designers have all realized – monsters make for good business. Whether it is Godzilla, Dracula, Gremlins or the extra-terrestrial Dragons who battle with Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* series, monsters are never far from our screens, both posing (*monstrare*) and transposing our most secret phobias.

But monsters terrify and intrigue for another reason too: they defy borders. Monsters are liminal creatures who can go where we can't go. They can travel with undiplomatic immunity to those undiscovered countries from where no human travelers – only monsters – return. Transgressing the conventional frontiers separating good from evil, human from inhuman, thinkable from unthinkable, natural from cultural, monsters scare the hell out of us and remind us that we don't know who we are. They bring us to no man's land and fill us with fear and trembling. In that sense we may say that monsters are our *Others*, *par excellence*. Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know.

This was always the case in fact: from the stag-men of paleolithic cave drawings to the satyrs and devils of classical and medieval art right down to the grotesque phantasmagorias of a painter such as Hieronymus Bosch in the 16th century. But with the Enlightenment attempt to banish monsters to the unconscious, to make them completely invisible, it is arguable that the experience of terror took on more prolific proportions. Monsters did not go away. They merely changed their habitation and their name. And returned with a vengeance. The Shadow struck back.

The main difference now, however, was that images of monstrosity



tended to gravitate around a human rather than a supra- or infra-human mind. A modern sentiment powerfully depicted in Goya's famous etching of 1799, *Il sueno de la razon produce monstros*.<sup>7</sup> So, as the Age of Reason progresses we find the gargoyles and griffins of the ancient cathedrals flying off from their parapets and entering the dream-works of the human unconscious. 'With the intellectual illumination of the Enlightenment came shadows', explains Nick Capasso:

The more we understood the world around us, the less we seemed to understand our own selves. Monsters crept into the dark void left by the increasingly questionable notion of an eternal soul. The Romantic writers and artists grasped this notion immediately, and monsters became a favorite metaphor to express new anxieties surrounding the self, and its conjoined twin, the other. Monsters also appeared as the obverse of the now common coin of Reason, and as catalysts for stimulating strong emotions in readers or viewers.<sup>8</sup>

But by the 20th century, it is the imaginary worlds of popular culture, cinema and art that become the privileged abodes of Unreason. One recalls here the cults surrounding figures such as Dracula (the seducer fiend), Frankenstein (the mechanical beast), or the Alien Invader (hybrid of within and without). Whether it be gothic, surrealist or postmodern in genre, the monster continues to hold the subconscious in thrall. And for this reason, the monster remains a personification of our repressed Other. It functions as that negative mirror-image of ourselves which we project onto a fantasy world. 'Flawed beings, scapegoats, the enemy, the unknown, and the damned must all be willed into being as foils to our own inherent beauty, virtue, integrity, truth.'<sup>9</sup> At times, indeed, monsters can appear even *more* monstrous by dint of their hiding horror beneath a mask of beauty. One thinks of the typical seducer-vampire, or Dr Jekyll, or the lady bombers in the *Battle of Algiers* (dressed literally to kill). Or Bin Laden himself – a handsome man in spite of his death-dealing rhetoric. Released from their preset moulds in ancient religion and cosmic hierarchy, the monsters of modernity take on a heightened sense of unpredictability. In an age of secular Reason, unreason appears all the more disturbing.

We have already noted how the monstrous Other provokes contradictory feelings of anxiety *and* attraction. And this very ambivalence is greatly exacerbated in the growing cult of the sublime which pointedly mocks Enlightenment rationalism (see our discussion of Kant below). Whether we are dealing with hideous blood-sucking vampires or the domesticated creatures of *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.*, there can be little doubt that human beings remain utterly fascinated, as much as appalled, by hybridized creatures that flout the distinction between human and non-human. Indeed, a thinker like Lévi-Strauss will argue that myths of

monsters are tokens of a universal primordial mind (*pensée sauvage*) which exists in the unconscious of each one of us – myths whose purpose it is to resolve at the level of symbolic expression contradictions that remain insoluble at the level of everyday empirical reality.

### III Gods and monsters

The hunger for horror stories did not abate in the wake of 11 September. It actually increased. The main reason for this, I suspect, is that the terror of the Twin Towers was *so* terrible that surrogates were needed to put some kind of mask on it. Analogous or alternative horrors were desperately sought in the guise of images or stories that might take some of the harm out of the *actual* horror. Fictionalized terror could be experienced vicariously, thereby giving us a certain distance from the real. As if the narrative framing of terror that Hollywood horror stories allowed, could afford relief from the unbearable immediacy of the event by putting it into relief. Horror movies as a kind of *Gestalt* therapy.

Theologian Timothy Beal has remarked on this *renewed* appeal of horror fantasies after the events of 11 September. Noting the extraordinary enthusiasm for revivals of famous monsters on TV and cinema, the author cites the much-hyped reissuing of Universal's 'Classic Monster Collection', revampings of the Dracula story (*Shadow of the Monster, Gods and Monsters*) and such big box-office movies as *Blood and Gold*, *Thirteen Ghosts*, *From Hell*, or in a lighter vein, *Monsters Inc.* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (with dragons or basilisks in almost every scene). Not to mention *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy with its Golems, Voids and Orcs. Because monsters are essentially 'undead', notes Beal, they keep coming back. And 11 September was a stark reminder of this. The more horrific the real world becomes, the more people *feel* the need to re-experience the horrible in unreal worlds. Why? Because the imaginary can furnish access to the heart of darkness which remains intolerable in the flesh. Hence our fascination with monster myths from the great classic sagas of Minotaurs and man-eating whales to the simple magic of children's stories. (Bruno Bettelheim observes, for instance, that the child can sleep peacefully precisely *because* it has exorcized its worst inner fears by projecting them onto the baleful beasts of the bedtime story. But we will return to this question of 'horror at a distance' in our discussion of Kant below.) What monsters reveal (*monstrare*) to us is nothing less than our craving to put a face on phobia. 'No matter how many times we exorcize them, blow them to bits, or banish them to outer space, they keep coming back for more. Our monsters are always trying to show us something, if we would only pay attention.'<sup>10</sup>

I think Beal is right to point up here a deep human tendency towards psychic transference and scapegoating. It is doubtless true that monsters provide us with images for our otherwise hazy sentiment of incipient doom. And viewed in this light, we can indeed see how Hollywood monster movies serve as vehicles for what Beal calls a 'public rite of exorcism in which our looming sense of unease is projected in the form of a monster and then blown away'. For even if there is some collateral damage before the battle is over, the monster will be defeated in the end and the nation restored to safety. More specifically, in the turbulent wake of 11 September, such monster movies provide 'a sense of closure' – for a time at least.

This last proviso is, I believe, very important. Monsters are more than surrogate traumas. They also reveal the undecidable character of many of our neat divisions and borders. Like those medieval maps where still uncharted territories were marked out with drawings of hideous creatures, accompanied by such caveats as Lenox Globe's *hic sunt dracones* ('here be dragons!').<sup>11</sup> And just as our ancestors were cautioned *and* enticed by such admonitions, we today also find our monsters both fascinating and forbidding. When it comes to terrors stalking our unconscious, we still encounter multiple miscreants staking out dark landscapes. In short, the monsters of the past are never really past.

What is most original about Beal's thesis, however, is his exploration of a deep complicity between Gods and monsters. Religion and horror, he argues, have been symbolically allied in many religions. Why? Because both signal a perplexing experience of otherness which is 'aweful'. That is to say, a religious experience of radical alterity often appears terrible in its very unfamiliarity. So much so that the idea of the 'Holy' itself (*Das Heilige*) is explicitly linked by thinkers such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade to an experience of wondrous horror – what the medievals called a *mysterium tremendum*. Or to return to examples from horror movies and literature, it is curious to note how films like Jordan's *Interview with a Vampire*, Merhinge's *Shadow of the Vampire*, or Herzog's *Nosferatu* deal with heterodox inversions of divinities as demons, proposing the monstrous as a dreadful yet alluring disclosure of otherness. Thus we find that while Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (and its many literary and cinematic successors) explores the possibility of God as monster, vampire stories inspired by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* tend to feature reversals of monsters as Gods. That there is interchangeability between Gods and monsters is not new, of course. Figures of supernatural strangeness were often identified with the divine, and especially, adds Beal, 'with its more dreadful, maleficent aspects'. Indeed, it can be argued that horror before the monstrous is analogous to certain kinds of mystical experience, especially when they elicit 'a vertigo-like

combination of dread and fascination'. Though this is surely giving a new twist to what St John Chrysostom called 'Holy Terror'.

It may be claimed, accordingly, that the popular culture of horror affords an alternative site for religious investigation.<sup>12</sup> And if it is true that New Age revivals of upbeat spirituality have been immensely popular in our time, the preoccupation with monsters – amplified by 11 September – may be said to represent its downbeat equivalent. As if sweetness and light needed to be counterbalanced by a new focus on the darkness of the divinity. In short, while much New Age religion celebrates harmony, peace and self-questing, praeternatural horror emphasizes our experience of 'rupture, fragmentation and insecurity'. Or as Beal explains, if the focus of the spiritual mainstream tends to be 'holistic' and 'cosmic', addressing our need for 'orientation within a meaningfully integrated and interconnected whole', the monsters of contemporary horror, by contrast, frequently recall the more 'chaotic, disorienting, and ungrounding dimensions of religion, envisioning an everyday life that is not without fear and trembling'.<sup>13</sup>

I agree with much of this analysis. But I have some reservations. In particular, I worry about the quasi-equivalency between light and horror. This smacks – to me at least – of the old Gnostic notion of God as a composite of good and evil – a notion that leads all too easily to a relativizing of ethical thinking: i.e. *deep down* we are all Rapists, Murderers, Child-Molesters, SS Torturers, etc. Well, no. Etty Hillesum was not Hitler. Mandelstam was not Stalin. Jesus was not Judas. And even though it is arguable that no human being is entirely innocent, it is important to be able to defend the claim that those slaughtered in Dachau, Rwanda, Srebernice, or the Twin Towers, were *not* identical with their slaughterers. So, while I fully endorse Beal's efforts to read our fascination with monsters symptomatically in terms of unconscious scapegoating and displacement mechanisms, I have to part company with him when he leans too closely towards Gnostic interpretations of religion as horror. For such interpretations all too often result in theodicy: the justification of evil as part of some overall divine plan. I do not think Beal would want to go down that road, but some of his conclusions are, to say the least, ambiguous. For instance: 'Our monsters open spaces in popular culture for negotiating ultimate questions . . . that resonate with a new and undeniable depth in this time of war and terror. . . . Is (evil), as Van Helsing says in *Dracula*, rooted deep in all good?'<sup>14</sup>

In short, while agreeing with pleas for a more tolerant attitude to enemies, I think it is important to stop short of morally equating the terrorist perpetrators of 11 September with the victims. For no matter how many monsters lurk within our collective unconscious, some people

are more innocent than others. And some more guilty. At least some of the time. Monstrous *actions* matter as much as monstrous *fantasies*. And we are responsible for both.

#### IV Philosophical responses

In my graduate seminar on 11 September, I discussed two main philosophical arguments with my students. The first was Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the Twin Towers and Terror. The second was Kant's commentary on the relationship between terror and the sublime in *The Critique of Judgment*.

##### 1 Baudrillard's fatalist thesis

Was it an accident that the terrorists chose the Twin Towers as the primary target of attack? Why did the World Trade Center (WTC) come to represent the apex of Western global power and wealth? Baudrillard's basic thesis is that the Twin Towers in New York epitomized the post-modern condition of capital. Contrary to the conventional view that the historical movement of capital develops from open competition towards monopoly, the suggestion here is that it actually reaches beyond monopoly into a 'tactical doubling of monopoly'. In short, duopoly is more final and effective than simple monopoly. Or if one prefers, when it comes to the economic culmination of capital and power, unitary systems need to be supplanted by binary systems. This is how Baudrillard argues his case:

Power is absolute only if it is capable of diffraction into various equivalents, if it knows how to take off so as to put more on. This goes for brands of soap-suds as well as peaceful coexistence. You need two superpowers to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble of itself. And the equilibrium of terror alone can allow a regulated opposition to be established. . . . The matrix remains binary. It will never again be a matter of a duel or open competitive struggle, but of couples of simultaneous opposition.<sup>15</sup>

In this scenario, the fact that there are *two* towers at the New York World Trade Center takes on exemplary significance. This doubling is, Baudrillard insists, quite novel with respect to the modernist architecture of New York City which for decades had produced an urban scape of singular, staggered buildings rivaling each other according to a logic of 'competitive verticality'. The Chase Manhattan competed with the Rockefeller Center which in turn mimetically competed with the Empire State and so on. But the skyline of the pyramidal jungle, with every

building trying to outdo the others, completely changed with the construction of the identical Twin Towers. Construing New York in this way as an architectural barometer of the historical evolution of the capitalist system, Baudrillard offers a startling summary of the symbolic function of the Towers. This new post-monopoly architecture, he observes, 'incarnates a system that is no longer competitive, but compatible, and where competition has disappeared for the benefit of the correlations'.<sup>16</sup> He continues his symptomatic reading thus:

The fact that there are two of them *signifies* the end of all competition, the end of all original reference. . . . For the sign to be sure, it has to duplicate itself. . . . The two towers of the W.T.C. are the visible sign of the closure of the system in a vertigo of duplication, while the other skyscrapers are each of them the original moment of a (modernist) system constantly transcending itself in a perpetual crisis and self-challenge.<sup>17</sup>

Just as Andy Warhol's replication of faces marked the shift from the modernist avant-garde of innovation and originality to its postmodern parody, so too the replication of the Towers epitomized the move from modernist to postmodernist architecture: the dynamism of historical *evolution* terminating in a certain homeostasis of *involution*. As high as they are, the twinning of the towers spells the end of verticality. 'They ignore the other buildings, they are not of the same race, they no longer challenge them, nor compare themselves to them, they look one into the other as into a mirror and culminate in this prestige of similitude. What they project is the idea of the model that they are one for the other, and their twin altitude presents no longer any value of transcendence.' In short, the double towers signify that the strategy of models has triumphed over the logic of rivalry and surpassing. And in this respect, it is significant that all reference to the outside world – the surface as façade, face, interior looking out on exterior – is absent, replaced by an *intra-contemplating* sufficiency of two. Like blind Siamese twins who talk only to themselves. 'There remains only a series closed on the number two, just as if architecture, in the image of the system, proceeded only from an unchangeable genetic code, a definitive model.'<sup>18</sup> The apex of auto-contemplation: '*l'égoïsme à deux!*'

But Baudrillard goes further. In a highly contentious essay, 'The Mind of Terrorism', written after 11 September, he extrapolates some disturbing implications of his doubling argument. The collapse of the Twin Towers was, he now claims, the 'Mother of all events' in that it symbolized the supreme *suicidal* act not just of the terrorists but of Western Global Capital itself. The image of the imploding Towers, he asserts, marked the self-collapse of the American Empire which had become so omnipotent and omnipresent that the only means of sublimating it was for

the terrorist virus to attack from within – in this case targeting the very heart of the Nation. The almost unanimous moral condemnation of this act across the globe masks, for Baudrillard, another unavowed but equally strong reaction: a secret ‘jubilation in watching this world super-power being destroyed, or rather destroying itself in an act of beatific suicide’.<sup>19</sup>

Baudrillard goes on to make the controversial claim that we are all inhabited by ‘a terrorist imagination’ unbeknownst to ourselves; and that this was evinced in our fascination with the televised images of the burning towers – as if we were saying, ‘They [the terrorists] did it, but we [secretly] wished it!’ *Schadenfreude*. Without this tacit complicity, he insists, the event would not have had the resonance it did. And part of the terrorists’ own symbolic strategy was that they could rely on this ‘unspeakable collusion’.<sup>20</sup>

Baudrillard’s reasoning here, as I see it, rests on the somewhat fatalist notion that the greater a power system becomes, the more it provokes its own negation. As when a body generates a self-eroding cancer or virus within itself. So that the scene of the self-collapsing World Trade Center becomes the binary mirror-image of the suicidal planes. A double self-destruction. Power corresponding to anti-power. Divinity (as in the Gnostic version) corresponding to the demon dark of its own unconscious. ‘The West, in the guise of an omnipotent and morally absolute divinity, declares war on itself.’<sup>21</sup> Hence the logic – however shocking – behind the fact that the terrorists had lived banal American lives for several years, boarded typical American airliners in typical American cities, before rounding on the nerve center of the body politic itself *from the inside*. The evil was shown to have been residing within the system itself. The collapse of the system was fatally pre-determined all along.

But an added difficulty I have with Baudrillard’s account here is that it seems to actually *justify* the act as an ineluctable counter-move within the binary game of absolute power. As though 11 September marked the necessary return of the repressed principle of ‘singularity’ to an homogeneous world system that had excluded it.<sup>22</sup> In this scenario, the terrorists become ‘double agents’ marking the return of the alienated monster within the body politic itself. The dividing line between outside and inside disappears. And this blurring of boundaries finds further confirmation in the viral spread of bio-chemical agents within the organs of centralized power – the Senate, Congress, law courts, media stations, etc. Terrorism, explains Baudrillard, occupies the heart of the culture that combats it, and the ‘visible fracture which opposes the underdeveloped and exploited parts of the world to the West secretly realigns itself with the *internal* fracture of the dominant system’.

Now, in my view, Baudrillard simply compounds the error of his

fatalist hypothesis when he concludes that while the system can cope with visible adversaries, it is helpless before this inner viral structure – as if the system of domination were secreting the seed of its own dissolution, its own ‘antidispositif’. Terrorism is thus considered the inevitable ‘shock wave’ of a dialectical reversal. Having ostensibly banished evil and darkness from its Enlightened Modern Empire, the West is henceforth compelled to suffer the return of the repressed – with a postmodern vengeance. This is why – after three world wars in the 20th century (I am including the Cold War), the enemy has now taken on the fantasmatic guise of a toxin infiltrating the interstitial fissures of power within the system: a guise which the West is unable to counteract having grown oblivious to its genesis and *raison-d’être*. And while Islam is, for Baudrillard, the crystallization of this fantasmal feedback, he insists that the binary conflict between terror and counter-terror is in fact in every one of us. The virus is everywhere. No one escapes. The system, devoid of effective enemies in the external world (the Taliban not counting as anything more than a convenient temporary target) finds itself at war with itself. Hence the emblematic function of the Twin Towers collapsing into themselves in a hail of smoke and ashes. Hence also the reason why suicide became the ultimate weapon of terrorism, as evidenced in Al Qaeda’s boast: ‘Our men desire to die as much as Americans desire to live.’ Baudrillard wraps up his nihilist thesis, finally, by declaring that what is really at stake in all this is *death*. Death not only as it irrupts ‘live’ onto the TV screen, but as an absolute event of symbolic sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

I personally find much that is fanciful, pretentious and objectionable in Baudrillard’s account. It smacks too much of the Fukayama thesis of the ‘end of history’ and represents that more cynical strand of post-modern thinking which all too often leads to paralysis and anomie. His conclusion that ‘there is no solution’ is untenable. But for all that, we may still concede that Baudrillard offers some useful insights. His focus on the Twin Towers as epitome of western capitalism, for instance, may shed some light on the compulsive character of the scenes broadcast across the TV screens of the entire world on 11 September. Far more so than the attack on the Pentagon (the epicenter of US military prestige), the attack on the WTC was perceived as a spectacular attack on the entire western capitalist world. It had, as Baudrillard rightly surmises, a symbolic sacrificial charge. And that is perhaps the reason why it included such an intense double response – of compassion and complicity – from many non-US nations. The target was not confined to one building or one nation. The feeling of unity experienced by so many in the wake of the attack may actually have been amplified by the duality of the object targeted and the deep ambivalence of the response.



Nor, it could be argued, was it symbolically insignificant that the collapse of the split towers led in turn to an international split between US and THEM, between inside and outside, between what Baudrillard refers to, rather schismatically, as 'Christian' and 'Muslim'. And here we might briefly recall Baudrillard's remark that each power needs another adversarial power in order to procure 'an equilibrium of terror' in some sort of 'regulated opposition'. This is *where*, in my view, his reasoning regresses back to the Huntington caricature of a world cleft between East and West. A world-view that is also promoted, let us not forget, by Al Qaeda in its Jihad against the infidel West. But I want to ask – against the fatalist binary logics of Baudrillard, Huntington and Al Qaeda – if this *has* to be so. Are there not ways of critically responding to the apocalyptic scenario of splitting? Is it true that the West is irrevocably confined to a blind cul-de-sac of homeostatic capitalism? Or that the East is condemned to a rage of fanatic fundamentalism? Are we *really* so imprisoned in binary systems that no exit from the labyrinthine matrix is conceivable? If such be the case, there is no answer to our question: what is to be done? And that, I submit, is unacceptable.

## 2 Kant on sublime terror

But let me defer a more considered response to this issue for now, in order to look briefly at the second text explored in our seminar on 11 September – namely, Kant's observations on the sublime and its relation to war and terror.

The sublime, for Kant, involves a 'representation of limitlessness'. Unlike the positive pleasure we feel on apprehending the beautiful, the sublime provokes a *negative* pleasure, combining a certain fascination with a certain repulsion. Moreover, as a contradictory pleasure, it arises only indirectly. 'Being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful', writes Kant, 'it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination.'<sup>24</sup> As such, the feeling of the sublime is said to 'contravene the ends of our power of judgment'. It is, we are told, 'ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation'. Thus challenging our capacity both to know and to represent, it is even described by Kant as 'an outrage on the imagination': an outrage, moreover, which is 'judged all the more sublime on that account'.<sup>25</sup> To rephrase this enigmatic account by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, we could say that the sublime is that which arises on the ashes of presentation (conceptual or sensible); it exposes itself like a photographic plate by virtue of inversion, its light emerging from its own darkness. With the sublime, the mind is incited to 'abandon sensibility' and admit that there is no

adequate presentation for the event in question. But so doing, it acknowledges that it is, paradoxically, on the basis of the 'sensuous presentation' of this very inadequacy that it flares up in the first place. In fact, it is the experience of the annihilation of the external world (what Kant calls nature), and the threat which this posed to us as perceivers, which excites the sublime as an experience of our own subjective interiority. We become most aware of our liberty – and therefore our superiority to nature – at the very moment when nature threatens to humiliate our sensible faculties. We take our distance from the formless menace. We negate the negation, as it were. And the name for this double negation is *freedom*. The sublime, in sum, expresses our freedom from nature. Freed from objective reality we become free for our own subjectivity. Outer pain turns to inner pleasure.

So it seems that it is not any particular object in nature that is sublime. It is something *in us*, made manifest in our response to certain experiences of 'chaos, disorder and desolation' in nature. On the whole, explains Kant accordingly, the sublime reveals nothing final in nature itself, 'but only in the possible *employment* of our intuitions of it in inducing a feeling in our own selves of a finality quite independent of nature'. This is imagination withdrawing from the world into itself. It is the mind returning to its internal, hitherto unsuspected resources. Admittedly, it often projects this feeling of *interior* psychic power in response to adversity onto the *exterior* object which occasions this response in us. For sublimity, Kant repeats, 'does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind'.<sup>26</sup>

It is in this specific sense that we might say that the feeling of awe and shock experienced by many who witnessed (largely on TV) the Event of 11 September, might be called 'sublime'. This seemingly inappropriate appellation begins to seem less insensitive, however, when we read how Kant relates the sublime to terror and fear in paragraph 28 of the *Third Critique*. Here Kant identifies the depth of the sublime in terms of our *resistance* to something dreadful. It is, he says, our response to terror that is in fact sublime rather than the terror itself. Citing a series of terrifying events, from volcanoes and vertiginous heights to hurricanes and violence, Kant argues that

provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, it is because our mind discovers unsuspected depths within itself in the face of some immeasurable menace outside of us that

we feel 'sublime'. And this very self-discovery presupposes that we have a certain security *vis-à-vis* the threat itself. As in Greek tragedy when we feel protected by the 'estrangement device' of stage or chorus. Or in horror movies or televised portrayals of violence where the electronic screen itself intervenes between us and destruction. Terror framed is terror defused.

The sublime may be understood, consequently, as an experience in the mode of the imaginary rather than of the real. If we were *literally* confronting terror we would collapse. But the mind which is helpless in nature becomes incredibly bold once immunized by the vaccine of subjectivity. This is how Kant accounts for the complex dialectic:

the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of estimating ourselves as independent of nature, and discovers a pre-eminence above nature that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature.<sup>28</sup>

This distanciation is, says Kant, what saves us from humiliation in our own person, 'even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence'.<sup>29</sup> We are dealing with a kind of aesthetic dispassion or audacity before adversity triggered by our ability somehow to transcend the immediate danger – at least *in our minds*. What we call sublime, therefore, is precisely that which 'raises imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible to the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature'.<sup>30</sup> And this claim is followed by Kant's all-important qualification that 'this estimation of ourselves loses nothing by the fact that we must see ourselves safe in order to feel this soul-stirring delight'.<sup>31</sup>

To sum up this complex analysis, I would say that sublime composure before danger might be thought to stem either (a) from an aesthetic distance (as in fictional or theatrical accounts of terror) or (b) from a certain negation – 'resistance' in both Kant's and Freud's sense – in the very midst of terror. This latter attitude of courageous calm in the midst of horror is, Kant affirms, witnessed in the great soldier who keeps his nerve in spite of all – a fortitude aided and abetted on the battlefield by the regulation of violence by certain martial forms, laws and conventions. One thinks of the lines of flute players and drummers leading the infantry into enemy fire (as in Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*), falling like skittles without cry or confusion. Smartly uniformed soldiers marching through the valley of death *as if* immune to their imminent destruction – their sublime indifference stemming from an uncanny detachment from the violence all around them as they evince an almost superhuman

endurance of suffering. Under such circumstances, says Kant, even war is sublime.

War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, Kant suggests, peace favours the soft-centered life of beauty. It fosters bourgeois mediocrity. He opines: 'a prolonged peace favors the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice, and effeminacy, and tends to degrade the character of a nation'.<sup>33</sup>

## V Political terror today

This Kantian account may be brought into more contemporary focus, I think, if we link it up with Hannah Arendt's analysis of Terror. In 'Ideology and Terror', Arendt identifies the subject of terror as one living in an aesthetic 'mood' of existential and epistemological 'dislocation'. A curious sense of sublime detachment, she notes, often attends this mood in those experiencing war or totalitarian coercion. The 'mood' induced by such Terror involves the following key characteristics: (1) flight from reality, (2) suspension of ordinary judgment and common sense, (3) fascination with the 'positive pain' of sublime self-destruction (Burke's phrase) linked to a yearning for total detachment, (4) a contradictory attitude of attraction and recoil, (5) an aestheticizing of political reality, and, finally, (6) a conflation of truth and fiction (i.e. ideology). The mood, she insists, remains attached to 'dark, confused, uncertain and obscure' sentiments, provoked by experiences of awe and terror. But it also entails, paradoxically, a wrenching disengagement from our everyday cares and concerns: a curious fact in keeping with Kant's view that the sublime 'calls up a power in us of regarding as small the things we care about: goods, health and life'. This strange and estranging mood is invoked by Arendt in relation to phenomena regarded as 'monstrous, colossal, shapeless and formless', overflowing the given limits of imagination and defying our empirical intuition. Its relevance to the events of 11 September is evident.

What is most intriguing about Arendt's analysis is that she attributes all of these characteristics to specific forms of *contemporary* politics – in particular, totalitarian and terroristic ideologies. In this way, Arendt gives a more topical spin to the Kantian association between terror and the sublime, anticipated by Burke's maxim that 'terror is in all cases

whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime'.<sup>34</sup> Arendt's recontextualizing of the issue in relation to 20th-century society gives the whole aesthetic analysis a very different charge. Now the sublime cocktail of 'negative pleasure/positive pain' takes on more disturbing connotations. The mood of disinterest *vis-à-vis* the everyday, caused by our divorce from the ordinary universe of common sense, shows potential signs of non-democracy. Our standing outside of ourselves can, we now realize, all too easily lead to self-alienation. Our indifference to the everyday preoccupations of concrete human affairs can slip into a certain social and political blindness. There is, in short, a price to pay.

To rephrase this shift in terms of the Kantian contrast between the beautiful and the sublime we could say something like this: if 'beauty is the symbol of morality' (Kant), the sublime is its opposite. For if the category of beauty induces democratic sentiments of universality and '*sensus communis*' – allied to the 'enlarged thinking' which comes from our capacity to imagine what it is like to be *others* or to engage in concrete moral action – the sublime draws us away from such democratic impulses into an unworldly inwardness. The sublime induces a freedom of indifference which can actually lead to political un-freedom – a sort of complicity with the impersonal administration of our universe by Party, Movement, or State. Worst of all, suggests Arendt, the political sublime can destroy the contemporary citizen's capacity for distinguishing between the imaginary and the real.<sup>35</sup> An incapacitation that consorts with that perverse alliance of coercion and collusion which, for Arendt, is the hallmark of ideological terror.

The above account might, I suspect, shed some light on what was going on in the minds of the terrorists as they planned and executed their act of Terror. But it might also, albeit in a very different register, help explain why so many millions of viewers sat transfixed before those TV images of towers collapsing on 11 September. The terror portrayed had, admittedly, nothing of the 'order' or 'respect for civilians' mentioned by Kant in his above description of the sublimity of war. But the manner of its portrayal in the world media could be said to have offered viewers a screen which vividly manifested the terror at the same time as it maintained the spectator at a safe distance. In such wise, television viewers were afforded a double experience of: (1) suffering 'as if' they were *present* to the terror (in modern America's first traumatic experience of alien Terror on its own soil); and (2) detachment by virtue of their real *absence* from the scene itself (as when Bush said to Congress, 'We are a Nation awakened to danger').

One hesitates to call this 'sublime' given the hideous nature of pain and loss involved. But when one considers Kant's insistence on the

*negative* character of the experience as well as the repulsion mixed with the fixation, it is not entirely irrelevant. How else explain the compulsive repetitiveness of these incredible, unthinkable images, endlessly played out on TV? Or the addictive response of many viewers? Indeed the endless replication of the scene, together with the verbal repetition of media-speak ('This is *impossible* to describe', 'This is *unreal*' etc.) suggested that what was at issue was not just the transmission of information but an experience of something *too real* to be consumed in anything but an imaginary idiom. In sum, the media experience of 11 September seems to have been less *cognitive* than *aesthetic*. Its reality was expressed by unreality.

## VI Conclusion

So how does our critical survey of approaches to Terror help us make sense of 11 September? The answer is by no means evident. But I will try, in conclusion, to outline a number of possibilities.

First, I believe that such analyses may help us recognize how mainstream media coverage of 11 September actually covered over as much as it uncovered. As mentioned above, the almost obsessional repetitiveness of the visual and verbal responses of news programs and talk-shows served to anaesthetize as much as to inform the public. Indeed I was even reminded at times of Walter Benjamin's observation that a society governed by media images might one day be capable of watching its own destruction with a certain aesthetic *frisson*. The vicariousness of the tele-viewing was itself a guarantor of security and even a certain voyeurism. But these disturbing issues are not topics favoured by the mass media. The mass communications networks are reluctant to put themselves under the spotlight. And this disinclination to self-scrutiny is even more pronounced in times of fear. Critically interrogating how the media portray terror may in such circumstances appear inappropriate or, worse, unpatriotic.

Second, the above analyses suggest that we may find more sophisticated and insightful ways of understanding terror in certain works of art or philosophy. Why? Because such disciplines are at an even *further* (Kant would say transcendental) remove from events than the media and so can sometimes afford us greater possibilities of reflecting upon, and facing up to, the uncanny phenomenon of attraction-recoil which the horrible can evoke. Hence my surmise that a critical analysis of Kant's observations on the 'negative pleasure' felt before the sublimity of war, or of Baudrillard's diagnosis of the doubling strategies of post-modern simulation and capital, might shed some light on the phenomenon of postmodern Terror – especially as communicated through the

mass media. Philosophical and artistic works are, I believe, capable of furnishing some extra, because indirect, insights into the enigma of horror. For both proffer an *unnatural* perspective on things – by virtue of style, genre and language. And this unnatural perspective is almost invariably absent from the all-too-naturalistic stance of most entertainment and news media which promise to bring us ‘live’ to the events themselves – with special reporters ‘on the ground’ dispatching the latest reports from the heat of battle. This is of course an illusion. The media are invariably *mediating* such events. But it is an illusion that hides itself, giving viewers the impression that they are witnessing things in a state of immediate reality (what Kant calls ‘nature’). The advantage of art and philosophy is that they are ‘critical’ discourses (again in Kant’s sense) which underscore the character of such illusion. And in so doing they may allow us to understand that every coverage of the unthinkable is always to some extent a cover-up. There is no unmediated presentation of events – however terrible – which does not involve some kind of framing, editing, emplotment, perspective or packaging.

The eye is never innocent; and even less so the eye of the media. *That* is, I believe, one of the primary truths disclosed by philosophical and artistic reflections on 11 September. And most especially by the exposure of the ways in which we try to show that which cannot, in reality, be shown. Genuine art and philosophy acknowledge the artifices inevitably involved in the portrayal of events. Which does not mean they give up on truth. On the contrary, it often means they bring it nearer. Certainly nearer than any news-and-entertainment medium that conceals its own mediating role – presuming to give us direct access to the ‘things themselves’.

Third, all this remains at the level of diagnosis. We have said nothing yet of the possibilities of prognosis that philosophical or artistic understanding might offer in the face of Terror. I do think it is important that we say something about this. For I believe that our hermeneutic of suspicion should be supplemented where possible by a hermeneutic of affirmation. An account of the ineffably sublime character of Terror (or the target of Terror, Capital) is suggestive. But it is not enough. The sublime, as Kant, Baudrillard and Arendt all concede, does not connect us to any kind of universal narrative empathy. Rather it draws us away from what Kant called ‘aesthetic reflective judgment’ and shatters our *sensus communis*. And if in the process the experience of sublime horror does serve to humiliate the rationalist and narcissistic pretensions of the ego – no bad thing – it still leaves us helpless before the basic question of how to respond ethically to the enigma of terror. As Noam Chomsky pertinently remarked on 11 September: ‘The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. . . . As to how to react we have a choice. We can express justified horror; we can seek to understand what may have led

to the crimes, which means making an effort to enter the minds of the likely perpetrators.<sup>36</sup>

The analysis of the sublime does not, in a word, help us to empathize with our fellow humans. This might be better achieved, I would suggest, by returning to the three other ways of responding to the terror, namely, (1) *practical understanding*, (2) *working through* and (3) *pardon*. The greatest of these, and by far the most demanding, is pardon. How do we forgive our enemies? And how do enemies forgive themselves (and us)? Who has the power to forgive? And who the right? Is forgiveness of terror possible? And even if impossible, should we still *attempt* it? I have no answers to such questions. But I do suspect that the more we understand the evils and causes of terror – in its phronetic, narrative and hermeneutic senses – and the more we work through the traumas of such terror, the closer we may get to making impossible pardon that little bit more possible. Pascal was right when he said, to understand is to forgive (*comprendre, c'est pardonner*). But is there anything more difficult?

Fourth, I would suggest, finally, that it is not insignificant that some of the most insightful responses to 11 September came from thinkers and artists. In the first category I would cite the reflections of Greisch, Derrida, Said, Chomsky and Beal, some of which are quoted in the endnotes above.<sup>37</sup> In the latter category I would mention the pieces by such writers as Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag, Joyce Carol Oates and Ian McEwan. The contribution by McEwan to the *Guardian* a few days after the event is to my mind one of the most cogent testimonies to the power of *narrative understanding*. 'Emotions have their narrative', writes McEwan. 'After the shock we move inevitably to the grief, and the sense that we are doing it more or less together is one tiny scrap of consolation.' To illustrate this, he narrates how many of us moved from the initial amazement and delirium before the visual impact of the televised scenes – 'the first plane disappearing into the side of the tower as cleanly as a posted letter; the couple jumping into the void, hand in hand', etc. – to a more personal, reflective empathy with the inner pain of particular victims. Like that of the San Francisco wife who phoned her sleeping husband from the burning tower to tell him (as he slept through the phone message) that she loved him. McEwan concludes: 'There is only love, and then oblivion. Love was all they had to set against the hatred of their murderers.'

But these testimonies compel us, in turn, to imagine ourselves into those very moments. To ask what we would have done or said had we been there? And McEwan adds that if the hijackers themselves had asked this question and identified with the sufferers they could not have carried out their acts.

It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than oneself is at the



core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality. The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanizing hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination. As for their victims in the planes and in the towers, in their terror they would not have felt it at the time, but those snatched and anguished assertions of love were their defiance.<sup>38</sup>

Such art breeds understanding.

If I began with Spinoza, let me end with Plato. In the *Crito*, Plato has Socrates recount the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Acknowledging that the monster of greed and violence has taken possession of the city, Theseus sets out to slay the Minotaur. But Socrates declines that option. He argues instead that the Monster is best resisted by the guiding principle: 'Do not harm, no matter what the circumstances.'<sup>39</sup> Socrates prefers to stay on in the city rather than to become a murderer of its laws by escaping. Resolving to address the hidden cause of the Monstrous, rather than simply slay the beast, Socrates confirms his basic philosophy that it is 'better to suffer than to do wrong'. He says no to the lure of sacrificial vengeance. He refuses to scapegoat.

*Department of Philosophy, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA*

PSC

## Notes

- 1 The term 'understand' is important here. For if *imagining* the event was all too possible – thanks to the compulsive repetition of TV images of planes slicing into towers and the towers collapsing – and if *knowing* was, at least in the immediate wake of the event, all too impossible, a question arising for philosophy remains: how might we attempt to *understand* this terrible and terrifying phenomenon? Or as Larry King put it, in more colloquial terms than those of Spinoza: 'How can we cover the unthinkable?' I am grateful to my friend and fellow philosopher, Jean Greisch, for the Spinoza citation and for his illuminating reflections on 11 September, 'The Great Game of Life and Fundamental Ethics'. In this paper, delivered at Boston College on 8 October 2001 (*Transversalités*, Vol. 81, 2003), Greisch asks how certain works of dramatic art – in particular Sophocles' *Antigone* and Ionesco's *Tueur sans Gages* – may help us to understand something (however faltering, minimal and oblique that understanding) about the terror of 11 September. Is there any phronetic wisdom to be gleaned from these literary explorations of the enigmas of violence and evil? And what might thinkers such as Spinoza, Kant, Heidegger, Taylor or Nussbaum be able to add to such wisdom? He ends by echoing Kant's famous question

in the *Essay on Radical Evil*, 'What can we hope?' Although my examples are different I share much of the spirit of Greisch's 'literary-hermeneutic' approach.

- 2 Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *Z Magazine* (September 2001). Samuel Huntington later published a full-length book on the subject entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (2001) where he expanded on his prediction that 21st-century global conflict would not be waged between nation-states but between general 'civilizations' defined by shared cultures, values and religions and transgressing the boundaries of sovereign nations. Of the eight major civilizations, Huntington predicts that the most violent clash will occur between the Christian West and the Muslim nations of the East stretching from Africa and the Middle East as far as Indonesia. While I do not deny that this scenario may indeed be the preferred view of Bin Laden and certain generals in the Pentagon, I would support Said's argument that we should do everything to combat such monolithic models of schismatic thinking to the extent that they deny the complex realities of difference, diversity and dissent within every civilization, no matter how hegemonic or totalizing it may presume to be. The curious irony is that the most enthusiastic beneficiary of the Huntington thesis is the Al Qaeda itself. Said concludes that the Huntington thesis is an ideological distortion that

wants to make 'civilizations' and 'identities' into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that 'the clash of civilizations' argues is the reality.

The hasty attempts to draw unambiguous lines in the sand, in the immediate wake of 11 September – between US and THEM, West and Islam, etc. – not only denies the disorderliness of reality but also masks the 'interconnect-edness of ordinary lives', 'ours' as well as 'theirs'. It often takes writers like Conrad, for instance, to remind us that the 'heart of darkness' we think is located way out there is also frequently to be found in the midst of the 'civilized' world itself. It was also Conrad, Said adds, who in *The Secret Agent* (1907) so brilliantly described 'terrorism's affinity for abstractions like "pure science"' (and by extension for 'Islam' and 'the West'), 'as well as the terrorist's ultimate moral degradation'.

- 3 Alan Wolfe adds: 'By insisting that we are not at war with Islam, Mr. Bush deprives Mr. Bin Laden of the religious battle he so intensely desires' ('The God of a Diverse People', *New York Times*, *Op-Ed*, 14 October 2001).
- 4 Greisch, 'The Great Game of Life'.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965).
- 6 Considering this wide variety of monsters and their enduring ability to provoke terror in us, the museum's curator, Nick Capasso, wrote: 'Monsters

are everywhere, and always have been. These terrible and wonderful beings, since the dawn of human consciousness, have lurked at the edges and stood front and center in all our far-flung cultures. Their ubiquity and longevity are based on their power and adaptability as symbols and metaphors for a great number of things, all centered upon anxiety. Whenever we are *bothered, nervous, frightened, uncertain, threatened, alienated, oppressed, repressed, confined, irrational, guilty, ill, flawed, sad, or angry*, monsters can appear. They are part and parcel of our condition, our imagination, our spirituality, our arts, and they won't go away – ever. We need them too much, and hence we are ever finding them, creating them, carrying them with us, and surrounding ourselves with them. They are legion.' Nick Capasso, Introduction to *Terrors and Wonders: Monsters in Contemporary Art* (Lincoln, MA: DeCordova Museum Publications, 2001), p. 7.

7 *ibid.*, p. 9: 'A world-view circumscribed by order, taxonomy, and the normative is constantly called into question by beings that resist classification and have no real limits or boundaries – the children of chaos.'

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*, p. 10.

10 Timothy Beal, 'Our Monsters, Ourselves', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 November 2001.

11 *ibid.* Beal writes wittily of monsters inhabiting those places 'where our well-established sense of the order of things touches chaos, where our toes curl over the edge of the abyss . . . where our boundlessly confident, ever-expanding consciousness shudders and freezes in its tracks'. Here, he claims, we hit up against 'the edges of secure knowledge, the limits of conscious reach, the boundaries of human expansion'.

12 *ibid.* 'Supernatural horror literature and movies frequently explore how gods and monsters relate – change places, even – in culture and in our imaginations.'

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.* More precisely: 'In the aftermath of September 11, Americans are all too familiar with the ways religious discourse can serve political rhetoric in making monsters out of others, imbuing them with diabolical power and construing our war against them as a holy war of absolute good against absolute evil. The questions raised by horror culture can introduce ambiguity into this cultural mix, undermining attempts to boil things down to a battle between us versus them, good versus evil. They invite us to discover our monsters in ourselves and ourselves in our monsters' (*ibid.*, p. 14). This goes in a similar direction to Jacques Derrida's response to 11 September and its aftermath, when he declares, in our New York dialogue of 10 October, that 'in this war, no one is innocent'. 'Terror, God and the New Politics: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Traversing the Imaginary*, ed. J. Manoussakis and P. Gratton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

15 Jean Baudrillard, from 'Simulations', in *Continental Aesthetics*, ed. R. Kearney and D. Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 423.

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 J. Baudrillard, 'L'esprit du Terrorisme', *Le Monde*, 2 November 2001.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 *ibid.* Baudrillard writes: 'Le terrorisme est l'acte qui restitue une singularité irréductible au coeur d'un système d'échange généralisé. Toutes les singularités (les espèces, les individus, les cultures) qui ont payé de leur mort l'installation d'une circulation mondiale régie par une seule puissance se vengent aujourd'hui par ce transfert terroriste de situation. . . . Le terrorisme, comme le virus, est partout. Il y a une perfusion mondiale du terrorisme, qui est comme l'ombre portée de tout système de domination, prêt partout à se réveiller comme un agent double' (*ibid.*, p. 3). Baudrillard's argument, it could be said, finds some support in the way in which the 'image' of Bin Laden, as rediscovered double secret agent, became not only a media obsession but the occasion of mass consumer commodities from Bin Laden mugs, posters and T-shirts (with 'Happy Hunting', 'Dead Meat' and 'Wanted Dead or Alive' on them) to anti-Bin Laden toilet paper at \$19 a roll, which went into mass production as early as 13 September with the following inscriptions under the image of the bearded turbaned enemy: 'Fight the War even in your bathroom with XTC XWipes. . . . Wipe away the heartache.' As Houston University historian Clifford Egan remarked, because Americans didn't know who the real Bin Laden was it was necessary in waging a shadow war to have an image of somebody out there to symbolize the threat and rally the populace. (Reported by Kevin Merida in the *Washington Post*, 6 October 2001.)
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 6. Baudrillard's argument proceeds as follows: 'Ne jamais attaquer le système en termes de rapports de forces. Ça, c'est l'imaginaire (révolutionnaire) qu'impose le système lui-même, qui ne survit que d'amener sans cesse ceux qui l'attaquent à se battre sur le terrain de la réalité, qui est pour toujours le sien. Mais déplacer la lutte dans la sphère symbolique, où la règle est celle du défi, de la réversion, de la surenchère. Telle qu'à la mort il ne puisse être répondu que par une mort égale ou supérieure. Défier le système par un don auquel il ne peut pas répondre sinon par sa propre mort et son propre effondrement' (*ibid.*). Or again: 'La tactique du modèle terroriste est de provoquer un excès de réalité et de faire s'effondrer le système sous cet excès de réalité. Toute la dérision de la situation en même temps que la violence mobilisée du pouvoir se retournent contre lui, car les actes terroristes sont à la fois le miroir exorbitant de sa propre violence et le modèle d'une violence symbolique qui lui est interdite, de la seule violence qu'il ne puisse exercer: celle de sa propre mort. C'est pourquoi toute la puissance visible ne peut rien contre la mort infime, mais symbolique, de quelques individus.' In short, in addition to deploying the 'real' weapons of the system – knives, arms, credit cards, planes, technology – the terrorists of 11 September also used the far more powerful weaponry of symbolic warfare, namely, sacrificial death. And we might add paranoia – each American looks to his or her other 'normal' neighbour and asks: is this typically well-behaved person a 'potential terrorist'? This latter weapon of hysterical phobia is what Baudrillard calls 'mental terrorism'. Baudrillard

compares this sacrificial and mental terrorism to chaos theory where an initial localized event (e.g. the flapping of a butterfly's wings) can provoke incalculable, exponential consequences. This is how the 'image' of the collapsing towers functioned, like a 'primitive scene' that would be played out again and again in the western subconscious. The event of 11 September became an image, a 'theatre of cruelty' *par excellence*, a compulsive and obsessional image-event which signaled the advent of a new postmodern truth: that reality becomes fiction and that both rival each other in the quest for the most unimaginable of images! The unprecedented power of the 11 September event is, according to Baudrillard, due to its uncanny conflation of the real and the imaginary (it was both at once), conscripting as it did the 'white magic' of electronic vision (TV) and the 'black magic' of terrorism. This 'spectacle of terrorism', concludes Baudrillard, provokes an 'immoral fascination' that makes both critical interpretation and meaningful political action impossible. Even the media cannot be blamed, for it too is part of the system ('There is no good or bad use of the media', claims Baudrillard). In this scenario of systemic doubling, good and bad, just and unjust, democracy and dictatorship become utterly 'reversible' – interchangeable. Apocalypse is indeed now, 'the terrorist attack corresponding to the precedence of the event over all models of interpretation' (ibid.). These conclusions I cannot accept, for they spell not only pessimism but paralysis – a sort of postmodern theodicy without God.

- 24 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, extract from the 'Analytic of the Sublime', para. 23, in *Continental Aesthetics: An Anthology*, ed. R. Kearney and D. Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 24.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 26.
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 *ibid.*
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 34 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), p. 58. I am indebted to Michael Halberstam for this and other references in my discussion of Arendt and the sublime; see in particular his article, 'Hannah Arendt on the Totalitarian Sublime and Its Promise of Freedom', in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 105f.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 118. Arendt herself uses the term 'terror' to refer both to the literal terrorization of society by a certain political movement or event, and also to a complex sentiment of existential dislocation, characterized by a paradoxical response of horrible humiliation and enthusiastic collusion on behalf of the 'subjects of terror'. See H. Arendt, 'Ideology and Terror', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979). On the more specific issue of our response to 'Terror' resulting in a collapse of the

real into the imaginary, see also the trenchant remarks of Susan Sontag on 11 September ('Ne Soyons pas Stupides Ensemble', *Le Monde*, 26 September 2001: 'Mais ceux qui occupent des fonctions officielles . . . ont décidé – avec la complicité volontaire des principaux médias – qu'on ne demanderait pas au public de porter une trop grande part du fardeau de la réalité. Les platitudes satisfaites et unanimement applaudies du Congrès d'une partie soviétique semblaient méprisables. L'unanimité de la rhétorique moralisatrice, destinée à masquer la réalité, débitée par les responsables américains et les médias au cours de ces derniers jours est indigne d'une démocratie adulte. Les responsables américains . . . nous ont fait savoir qu'ils considèrent que leur tâche n'est qu'une manipulation: donner confiance et gérer la douleur. La politique d'une démocratie – qui entraîne des désaccords et qui encourage la sincérité – a été remplacée par la psychothérapie. Souffrons ensemble. Mais ne soyons pas stupides ensemble. Un peu de conscience historique peut nous aider à comprendre ce qui s'est exactement passé, et ce qui peut continuer à se passer.'

- 36 Chomsky adds: 'If we choose the latter course [i.e. to try to understand] we can do no better, I think, than to listen to the words of Robert Fisk, whose direct knowledge and insight into affairs of the region is unmatched after many years of distinguished reporting. Describing "The wickedness and awesome cruelty of a crushed and humiliated people", he writes that "this is not the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days. It is also about American missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia – paid and uniformed by America's Israeli ally – hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps". And much more. Again, we have a choice: we may try to understand, or refuse to do so, contributing to the likelihood that much worse lies ahead.' (From Noam Chomsky, Open Letter circulated on the internet, 18 September 2001.)
- 37 Apart from those already cited above, see also our dialogue with Jacques Derrida on the events of 11 September, recorded in New York University on 10 October 2001 and published in *Traversing the Imaginary*, ed. Manoussakis and Gratton. See also the illuminating discussion of the events by two other French philosophers, Paul Ricoeur and Stanislas Breton, in 'Décrypter la Violence Terroriste', *Le Croix*, 25 October 2001: 14–15, where such issues as violent and non-violent resistance, the 'Just War', monotheism and the western crisis of democracy, are debated. The key point issuing from this exchange is the need to 'understand' as well as to 'judge'. See also Thich Nhat Hanh's and the Dalai Lama's Buddhist reflections on 11 September excerpted in *Sunday Tribune*, Dublin, September 2001. 'All violence is injustice – the only antidote to violence is compassion. And what is compassion made of? It is made of understanding. . . . To understand, we must find paths of communication so that we can listen to those who desperately are calling out for our understanding – because such an act of violence [as 11 September] is a desperate call for attention and for help.'

- 38 Ian McEwan, *Guardian* (UK newspaper), 15 September 2001. I am grateful to my friends Michael and Cathy Fitzgerald for bringing this text to my attention.
- 39 See here Jeremiah Conway's illuminating article, 'Socrates and the Minotaur: Following the Thread of Myth in Plato's Dialogues', *Teaching Philosophy* 16(3) (September 1993): 193–143. I am grateful to my graduate student Carlos Bohorquez, for bringing this essay to my attention. Conway argues that the Minotaur itself is not the real threat: 'the original threat is the greed, self-promotion, fear and revenge that led Minos to possess what belonged to the gods; these forces, not the Minotaur, are the real danger and responsible for creating the monster in the first place' (ibid., p. 199). Conway concludes that 'The role of Theseus (which the Athenians are busy celebrating) is a story of heroism built on forgetfulness. In killing the Minotaur, Theseus mistook the image of danger for the source of danger itself' (ibid., p. 200). Theseus was unmindful of the surrounding circumstances and deeper sources of evil. He forgot his own family's complicity with the creation of the Monster and that his own actions would make him just as monstrous as the Minotaur (ibid.). By contrast, Socrates' heroic refusal to engage in revenge and violence 'repairs the forgetfulness of Theseus and restores to the myth precisely those dimensions that Theseus (and the Athenians who model themselves after him) overlooked. The hero's journey for Socrates is learning to do no harm, ridding from the soul the desire for revenge. Though he sees Athens and its laws have become misshapen into a devouring Minotaur, Socrates will not slay it' (ibid.). In this manner, Plato is suggesting that philosophical understanding may help to guide Socrates out of the labyrinth of popular opinion and myth, which holds that one should answer one wrong with another wrong. 'The thread of philosophy' is thus offered by Plato to the Athenian audience as an alternative to the received propaganda of blood-cycles: 'love of truth' (*philein-sophia*) is proposed as an alternative to the sword.