Aretoulakis, Emmanouil, *Forbidden Aesthetics, Ethical Justice, and Terror in Modern Western Culture*

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4 In the wake of numerous studies and scholarly work seeking to chart the ties between trauma, violence and the dominant role of the image, and in response, perhaps, to the quest for a trope that may signal a cross-cultural ethical engagement with the effects of terrorism, Emmanouil Aretoulakis offers a challenging proposition: that the horror and outrage emerging from viewing images of (man-made or natural) catastrophe come hand in hand with a fascination, a Burkean type of delight, exhilaration even, before terror and destruction. More importantly, notwithstanding the inclusion of several references and admissions to this effect, Aretoulakis does not restrict his analysis to what one may consider a mere reformulation of Sigmund Freud’s concept of *Schadenfreude*. Instead, and by turning to the Kantian idea of disinterested judgment of the beautiful, he insightfully argues for the “reaffirmation of the beautiful image as decidedly contributing to historical memory” (xvii), and posits “the possibility of a forbidden aesthetics … which may not be ‘moral’ in the conventional sense, but it certainly is ethical in a broader sense” (xvii).

5 In order to unravel his controversial yet bold and compelling thesis, Aretoulakis delves into the “forbidden aesthetics” of natural disasters and man-made terrorism spanning
from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries and engages in a (curiously, backward) discussion of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, on September 11, 2001, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. The introduction and first chapter of his book, titled “Does Beauty Think?: The Scope of Aesthetic Reflection and the Scene of Terror,” present the reader with a gripping, stimulating argument, a paradox that is powerfully stated in the opening lines: “this book is about beauty in a terrorizing world. More specifically, it is about the subjective experience of the beautiful in the face of terror and human tragedy” (xi); and attentively elaborated on in the pages to come.

Eloquently and rigorously moving through time and philosophy, Aretoulakis places the unspeakable or inconceivable catastrophe alongside notions of beauty and ethics. He calls upon Kant’s concepts of “disinterestedness” and “reflective judgement,” as well as Burke’s perception of a feeling of satisfaction or admiration—the “notion of delight as a feeling of relief (rather than positive pleasure) at the remote spectator’s realization that she is not harmed during the act of bearing witness to a catastrophe” (3)—permeating the witness of a disaster of such magnitude. He then turns to the words and works of Jacques Derrida, Hanna Arendt, Dominick LaCapra, Elaine Scarry, or Noel Carroll, among others, to discuss the political and ethical connotations of such witnessing, and to highlight the pivotal role of the image. While acknowledging the empathic potential carried by the image, and reminding us of the inherent possibilities of image-mediated witnessing—where cognition and imagination coalesce—Aretoulakis formulates his concept of “forbidden aesthetics:” a type of aesthetics generated by art in general—and images in particular—that, albeit immoral, paradoxically prove to be utterly ethical, empowering, and seminal to the preservation of memory and knowledge of the fact.

Aretoulakis turns his proposition into a solid thread pervading and tightly connecting all subsequent chapters of his monograph; he consistently and meticulously applies his theory to the cases he chooses to explore and, despite the obvious selection process and consequent omissions involved, develops his observations in a convincing, if at times rushed, manner. Thus, chapter two, “A Glimpse into the Forbidden: Aesthetic Appreciation, Kant and 9/11,” tackles the WTC attacks by way of disaster art, specifically Joel Meyerowitz’s photographic work on Ground Zero, British artist Damien Hirst’s and German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s comments and descriptions of the terrorist attacks, as well as Jean Baudrillard’s thoughts on the visual powerfulness of the Towers’ collapse footage. Again, Aretoulakis turns to the ways in which “in order to preserve the memory of atrocity, thereby keeping atrocity from repeating itself, we have to retrieve emotion and sensibility, which, in turn, will lead us to place more emphasis on the non-rationality of terror” (39); he discusses presence and representation by way of imagination; and offers the reader an abundance of examples from all arts, painting, photography, music, writing—even though, curiously, he refrains from treating the numerous endeavors at experimental, art-in-literature, writing and highlights “critical/journalistic reception of the footage … assuming the form of a beautiful literary narrative of panic and real horror” (53)—to note how aesthetic appreciation “potentially promote[s] the political and consolidate[s] an ethically responsible attitude toward history and the nations” (42).

Accordingly, chapter three, “The Nuclear Image and the Forbidden Aesthetics of Beauty,” reads the nuclear blast in 1945, by way of Kant’s concept of the awe-generating “sublime,” specifically with reference to the “fully aesthetic image of the mushroom
cloud: a flawless image signifying a flawless attack, the ‘perfect ending’ of a world conflict” (65). This image provides Aretoulakis with the par excellence paradigm for his “forbidden aesthetics:” the writer elaborates on the concept of terrorist-as-artist, creating spectacular images of beauty, and writes of the Los Alamos scientists as poets, producing “indeed a secret artwork” (67), only to proceed with a discussion of the ways in which the mushroom cloud symbol and the horror it entailed quickly turned into a deterrent: “But to bear witness to such an iconic image in the context of securing an ethical treatment of nuclear power and vision involves also the unconscious act of aestheticizing the forbidden icon/image by means of reflective judgment” (71). He then offers a well-researched account of the in situ experience of the blast, as seen by both victims and perpetrators, with references that constitute eloquent proof of this strange mixture of horror and beauty he explores; which testify to the importance of witnessing, as well as the necessity to resort to a sensory—synaesthetic even—apprehension of the event and its “apocalyptic imagery” (85); and which allow him, again, to engage in a reaffirmation of the ethical value of such representations for the purpose of (re)memorialisation.

Chapter four, “The Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755,” is the part of the book that, arguably, solidifies the writer’s argument and moves the monograph away from other studies of atrocity that habitually limit their scope to man-made acts of terrorism and disaster. The writer’s choice to include a natural catastrophe speaks to the originality of his contribution and elucidates his proposition, as Aretoulakis’s analysis, consistently informed by Kant’s and Burke’s writings, emphasizes the center-stage role of the spectator/witness and the paramount importance of imagination. “Even the most indomitably fierce natural phenomenon or manmade catastrophe,” the writer states, “can be born witness to as long as there is an available spectator who is ready to enframe, objectify, contain, and finally aestheticize it” (117); reportage references to the disaster at the time, he notes, as well as pictorial representations of the quake and consequent tsunami, testify not only to the need for metaphoric schemas that may communicate the ineffable real, but also to an act of imagining that signals “comprehending and eventually identifying with the other’s predicament” (115), hence, a meaningful, ethical act of empathy. What is more, Aretoulakis’s particular focus on “disaster tourism” and imaginative processes activated by the groups of foreigners visiting the site, drawn by the horrible beauty of the rubble, proves fertile ground for the writer to highlight the parallels between the Lisbon quake and the acts of terror explored in the previous chapters—parallels that are carefully, clearly and explicitly drawn throughout the book—and, thus, successfully reinforce his thoughts and formulations.

Emmanouil Aretoulakis’s thoroughly annotated and carefully indexed book is, without a doubt, a controversial, yet insightful book. The writer’s choice of material and expressions—his discussion of the Nazi photos, for instance, or the consistent use of the term “Hiroshima Holocaust”—will surely be met with fervent opposition if read through the filter of Holocaust studies; and his bibliographical references often leave something to be desired: how can one ponder on the “crisis of witnessing” (xvi) without any mention to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s foundational text Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Psychoanalysis, Literature and History? How can any discussion of photography not include an at-length reference to Susan Sontag’s, Roland Barthes’s or W.J.T. Mitchell’s work? And, perhaps, the writer’s promotion of empathy as a cornerstone of the “ethical justice” triggered by his “forbidden aesthetics” would benefit greatly from Dominick LaCapra’s
concept of “empathic unsettlement.” Nevertheless, Aretoulakis presents an impressive array of images, from Titian and Delacroix, to the nuclear mushroom and drawings of the hibakusha, disaster art and photographs of atrocity, that, if not always clearly placed, successfully establish a canon of “forbidden aesthetics” and convincingly illustrate the writer’s original thought. He offers a courageous contribution, a truly ingenious proposition that may not only respond to the much-discussed quest for a cross-cultural ethical engagement in the face of catastrophe, but also breaks new ground for the numerous scholars working on aesthetics and philosophy, commemorative art and trauma studies, transnational memory, all fields of research that are nowadays customarily associated with the writer’s choice of material.

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