

Lacanian notion that, while animals can deceive by presenting what is false as true, only humans (entities inhabiting the symbolic space) can deceive by presenting what is true as false. And this insight also allows us to return to the example of cutters: if the true opposite of the Real is reality, what if, then, what they are actually escaping from when they cut themselves is not simply the feeling of unreality, of the artificial virtuality of our lifeworld, but the Real itself which explodes in the guise of uncontrolled hallucinations which start to haunt us once we lose our anchoring in reality?

Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (France/Austria 2001) helps us to negotiate this conundrum. The film is based on a short novel by Elfriede Jelinek, the story of a passionate but perverted love affair between a young pianist and his older teacher (superbly played by Isabelle Huppert): it draws on the old cliché, from *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, of a young sexually repressed girl from an upper-class family who falls passionately in love with her piano teacher. Today, however, a hundred years later, more than just the respective gender roles are reversed: in our permissive times, the affair has to be given a perverted twist. Things take a fateful turn and start to slide towards the inexorable tragic ending (the teacher's suicide) at a precise moment when, in answer to the boy's passionate sexual advances, the 'repressed' teacher violently opens herself up to him, writing him a letter with a detailed list of her demands (basically, a scenario for masochistic performances: how he should tie her up, force her to lick his anus, slap and even beat her, and so on). It is crucial that these demands are *written* – what is put on paper is too traumatic to be pronounced in direct speech: her innermost fantasy itself.

When they are thus confronted – he with his passionate outbursts of affection and she with her cold, impassionate distance – this setting should not deceive us: it is she who in fact opens

herself up, laying her fantasy bare to him, while he is simply playing a more superficial game of seduction. No wonder he withdraws in panic from her openness: the direct display of her fantasy radically changes her status in his eyes, transforming a fascinating love object into a repulsive entity he is unable to endure. Soon afterwards, however, he himself becomes perversely attracted by her fantasmatic scenario, caught up in its excessive *jouissance*, and, at first, tries to return her own message to her by enacting elements of her fantasy (he slaps her so that her nose starts to bleed, kicks her violently; when she breaks down, withdrawing from the realization of her fantasy, he passes to the act and makes love to her in order to seal his victory over her. The consummated sexual act which follows is, in its almost unbearable pain, the best exemplification of Lacan's *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*: although the act is performed in reality, it is – for her, at least – deprived of its fantasmatic support, and thus turns into a disgusting experience which leaves her completely cold, pushing her towards suicide. It would be totally misleading to interpret her display of fantasy as a defence-formation against the sexual act proper, as an expression of her inability to let herself go and enjoy the act: on the contrary, the displayed fantasy forms the core of her being, that which is 'in her more than herself', and it is the sexual act which is, in effect, a defence-formation against the threat embodied in the fantasy.

In his (unpublished) seminar on anxiety (1962–63), Lacan specifies that the true aim of the masochist is not to generate *jouissance* in the Other, but to provide its anxiety. That is to say: although the masochist submits himself to the Other's torture, although he wants to serve the Other, he himself defines the rules of his servitude; consequently, while he seems to offer himself as the instrument of the Other's *jouissance*, he effectively discloses his own desire to the Other and thus gives rise

to anxiety in the Other – for Lacan, the true object of anxiety is precisely the (over)proximity of the Other's desire. That is the libidinal economy of the moment in *The Piano Teacher* when the heroine presents to her seducer a detailed masochistic scenario of how he should mistreat her: what repulses him is this total disclosure of her desire. (And is this not also perfectly illustrated by the painful scene from David Fincher's *Fight Club* of Ed Norton beating himself up in front of his boss? Instead of making the boss enjoy it, this spectacle obviously provokes his anxiety.)

For this reason, the true choice apropos of historical traumas is not the one between remembering or forgetting them: traumas we are not ready or able to remember haunt us all the more forcefully. We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly. In order to account for this paradox, we should bear in mind that the opposite of *existence* is not nonexistence, but *insistence*: that which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence (the first to articulate this opposition was, of course, Schelling, when, in his *Treatise on Human Freedom*, he introduced the distinction between Existence and the Ground of Existence). When I miss a crucial ethical opportunity, and fail to make a move that would 'change everything', the very nonexistence of what I *should have done* will haunt me for ever: although what I did not do does not exist, its spectre continues to insist. In an outstanding reading of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History',<sup>11</sup> Eric Santner elaborates Benjamin's notion that a present revolutionary intervention repeats/redeems past failed attempts: the 'symptoms' – past traces which are retroactively redeemed through the 'miracle' of the revolutionary intervention – are

'not so much forgotten deeds, but rather forgotten *failures* to act, failures to *suspend* the force of social bond inhibiting acts of solidarity with society's "others":

symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but, more modestly, past *failures to respond* to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering in some sense belongs to the form of life of which one is a part. They hold the place of something that is *there*, that *insists* in our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of *voids* – or, perhaps, better, defenses against voids – that persist in historical experience.

Santner specifies how these symptoms can also take the form of disruptions of 'normal' social life, like participations in the obscene rituals of the reigning ideology. Was not the infamous *Kristallnacht* in 1938 – that half-organized, half-spontaneous outburst of violent attacks on Jewish homes, synagogues, businesses, and people themselves – a Bakhtinian 'carnival' if ever there was one? We should read this *Kristallnacht* precisely as a 'symptom': the furious rage of such an outburst of violence makes it a symptom – the defence-formation covering up the void of the failure to intervene effectively in the social crisis. In other words, the very rage of the anti-Semitic pogroms is a proof *a contrario* of the possibility of the authentic proletarian revolution: its excessive energy can be read only as a reaction to the ('unconscious') awareness of the missed revolutionary opportunity. And is not the ultimate cause of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the Communist past) among many intellectuals (and even 'ordinary people') of the defunct German Democratic Republic also a longing – not so much for the Communist past, for what actually went on under Communism, but, rather, for what *might*

11. Eric Santner, 'Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, and the Limits of the Enlightenment' (unpublished paper, 2001).

have happened there, for the missed opportunity of another Germany? Consequently, are not post-Communist outbursts of neo-Nazi violence also a negative proof of the presence of the emancipatory chances, a symptomatic outburst of rage displaying an awareness of missed opportunities? We should not be afraid to draw a parallel with individual psychic life: just as the awareness of a missed 'private' opportunity (say, the opportunity of engaging in a fulfilling love relationship) often leaves traces in the guise of 'irrational' anxieties, headaches, and fits of rage, the void of the missed revolutionary chance can explode in 'irrational' fits of destructive rage. . . .

Is the 'passion for the Real' as such, then, to be rejected? Definitely not, since, once we adopt this stance, the only remaining attitude is that of refusing to go to the end, of 'keeping appearances'. The problem with the twentieth-century 'passion for the Real' was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*. How? Let us begin with the tension between universal and particular in the use of the term 'special': when we say 'We have special funds!', we mean illegal or at least secret funds, not just a specification of public funds; when a sexual partner says 'Do you want something special?', he or she means a non-standard 'perverted' practice; when a police officer or journalist refers to 'special interrogation measures', he or she means torture or other similar illegal pressures. (And were not the units in Nazi concentration camps, which were kept apart and used for the most horrifying job of killing and cremating thousands, and disposing of the bodies, called *Sonderkommando*, special units?) In Cuba, the difficult period after the disintegration of the Eastern European Communist regimes is also referred to as the 'special period'.

Along the same lines, we should celebrate the genius of Walter Benjamin which shines through in the very title of

early work: *On Language in General and Human Language in Particular*. The point here is not that human language is a species of some universal language 'as such' which also comprises other species (language of gods and angels? animal language? the language of some other intelligent beings out there in space? computer language? the language of DNA?): there is no actually existing language other than human language – but, in order to comprehend this 'particular' language, we have to introduce a minimal difference, conceiving it in terms of the gap which separates it from language 'as such' (the pure structure of language deprived of the insignia of human finitude, erotic passions and mortality, struggles for domination and the obscenity of power). This Benjaminian lesson is the lesson missed by Habermas: what Habermas does is precisely what one should *not* do – he posits the ideal 'language in general' (pragmatic universals) *directly* as the norm for actually existing language. So, along the lines of Benjamin's title, we should describe the basic constellation of the social law as that of the 'Law in general and its obscene superego underside in particular' . . .

How does this apply to social analysis? Take Freud's analysis of the Rat Man case.<sup>12</sup> The Rat Man's mother had a higher social status than his father, while his father had a penchant for coarse language and a legacy of unpaid debts. Moreover, the Rat Man learned that not long before meeting his mother, his father had pursued an attractive but penniless girl, whom he abandoned to marry a rich woman. His mother's plan to marry the Rat Man into a rich family put him into the same situation as that of his father: the choice between the poor girl he loved and the more materially promising match arranged for him by his mother. It is within these co-ordinates that we should locate the fantasy of the

<sup>12</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 10).

rat torture (the victim is bound to a pot containing starving rats; the pot is placed upside-down on his buttocks, so that the rats gnaw their way into the victim's anus): this story was told to the Rat Man during military training. He was keen to show the regular officers that people like him (from a well-to-do-family) could nevertheless accept the rigours of army life as well as any hardened soldier of humbler birth – in this way, the Rat Man wanted to bring together the two poles of rich and poor, higher and lower social status, that had divided his family history. The cruel captain of his unit enthusiastically defended the practice of corporal punishment, and when the Rat Man disagreed with him vigorously, the captain then, as it were, threw down his trump card and described the rat torture. It is not only that the multiplicity of links which supports the terrible fascinating power of the rat-torture fantasy is sustained by the texture of signifying associations (*Rat* – advice; *Ratte* – rat; *Rate* – the interest rates to be paid; *heiraten* – to marry; *Spicharte* – a slang word for a compulsive gambler . . .). What seems crucial is the fact – rarely, if at all, mentioned by the numerous interpreters – that the choice confronted by both father and son concerns *class antagonism*: they both tried to overcome the class divide by reconciling the two opposing sides; their lot was that of a boy of humble origins who marries into a rich family, but none the less retains his ingrained low-class attitude. The figure of the cruel captain intervenes at this precise juncture: his coarse obscenity belies the idea of class reconciliation, invoking cruel bodily practices which sustain social authority. Would it not be possible to read this figure of the cruel captain as a Fascist figure of the obscene exercise of brutal power? As the cynical and brutal Fascist thug dismissing the soft-hearted liberal, aware that he is doing his dirty work for him?

*Apocalypse Now Redux* (2000), Francis Ford Coppola's newly edited longer version of *Apocalypse Now*, stages the co-ordinates

of this structural excess of state power in the clearest possible way. Is it not significant that in the figure of Kurtz, the Freudian 'primordial father' – the obscene father-enjoyment subordinated to no symbolic law, the total Master who dares to confront the Real of terrifying enjoyment face to face – is presented not as a remainder of some barbaric past, but as the necessary outcome of modern Western power itself? Kurtz was a perfect soldier – as such, through his overidentification with the military power system, he turned into the excess which the system has to eliminate. The ultimate horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is this insight into how Power generates its own excess, which it has to annihilate in an operation that has to imitate what it fights (Willard's mission to kill Kurtz does not exist in the official record – 'it never happened', as the general who briefs Willard points out). We thereby enter the domain of secret operations, of what the Power does without ever admitting it. And does not the same go for today's figures presented by the official media as the embodiments of radical Evil? Is this not the truth behind the fact that Bin Laden and the Taliban emerged as part of the CIA-supported anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Afghanistan, and behind the fact that Noriega in Panama was an ex-CIA agent? Is not the USA fighting its own excess in all these cases? And was the same not true already of Fascism? The liberal West had to join forces with Communism to destroy its own excessive outgrowth. (Along the same lines, I am tempted to suggest what a truly subversive version of *Apocalypse Now* would have been: to repeat the formula of the anti-Fascist coalition, and have Willard propose to the Vietcong a pact to destroy Kurtz.) What remains outside the horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is the perspective of a collective political act *breaking out* of this vicious cycle of the System which generates its superego excess and is then compelled to annihilate it: a revolutionary violence which no longer relies on the superego obscenity. This 'impossible' act is what

takes place in every authentic revolutionary process.

On the opposite side of the political field, the archetypal Eisensteinian cinematic scene which expresses the exuberant orgy of revolutionary destructive violence (what Eisenstein himself called 'a veritable bacchanalia of destruction') belongs to the same series: when, in *October*, the victorious revolutionaries penetrate the wine cellars of the Winter Palace, they indulge in an ecstatic orgy of smashing thousands of expensive wine bottles; in *Bezhin Meadow*, the village Pioneers force their way into the local church and desecrate it, robbing it of its relics, squabbling over an icon, sacrilegiously trying on vestments, laughing heretically at the statuary. . . . In this suspension of goal-oriented instrumental activity, we in effect get a kind of Bataillean 'unrestrained expenditure' – the pious desire to deprive the revolution of this excess is simply the desire to have a revolution without revolution.

This scene should be opposed to what Eisenstein does in the terrifying final scene of Part II of *Ivan the Terrible*: the carnivalesque orgy which takes place stands for the Bakhtinian fantasmatic place in which 'normal' power relations are turned around; in which the Tsar is the slave of the idiot whom he proclaims the new Tsar. In a weird mixture of Hollywood musical and Japanese theatre, the chorus of the infamous 'Oprichniki' (Ivan's private army, which has been doing his dirty work for him, mercilessly liquidating his enemies) dances and sings an utterly obscene song which celebrates the axe cutting off the heads of Ivan's enemies. The song first describes a group of boys having a rich meal: 'Down the middle . . . the golden goblets pass . . . from hand to hand!' The Chorus then asks, with pleasurable nervous expectation: 'Come along. Come along. What happens next? Come on, tell us more!' And the solo Oprichnik, bending forward and whistling, shouts the answer: 'Strike with the axes!' Here we are at the obscene site

where musical enjoyment meets political liquidation – and, taking into account the fact that the film was shot in 1944, does this not confirm the carnivalesque character of the Stalinist purges? That is the true greatness of Eisenstein: that he detected (and depicted) the fundamental shift in the status of political violence, from the 'Leninist' liberating outburst of destructive energy to the 'Stalinist' obscene underside of the Law.

The Catholic Church itself relies on (at least) two levels of such obscene unwritten rules. First, of course, there is, the infamous *Opus Dei*, the Church's own 'white mafia', the (half-)secret organization which somehow embodies the pure Law beyond any positive legality: its supreme rule is unconditional obedience to the Pope and a ruthless determination to work for the Church, with all other rules being (potentially) suspended. As a rule, its members, whose task is to penetrate the top political and financial circles, keep their *Opus Dei* identity secret. As such, they are effectively 'opus dei' – the 'work of God'; that is, they adopt the perverse position of a direct instrument of the big Other's will. Then there are the numerous cases of sexual abuse of children by priests – these cases are so widespread from Austria and Italy to Ireland and the USA, that we can in fact talk about an articulated 'counterculture' within the Church, with its set of hidden rules. And there is an interconnection between the two levels, since *Opus Dei* regularly intervenes to hush up sexual scandals involving priests. Incidentally, the Church's reaction to sexual scandals also demonstrates how it actually perceives its role: the Church insists that these cases, deplorable as they are, are its own internal problem, and displays great reluctance to collaborate with the police in their investigations. And, indeed, in a way, it is right: abuse of children is the Church's internal problem; that is to say, an inherent product of its very institutional symbolic organization, not just a series of particular criminal cases

concerning individuals who happen to be priests. Consequently, the answer to this reluctance should be not only that we are dealing with criminal cases, and that if the Church does not fully participate in their investigation, it is an accessory after the fact; moreover, the Church as such, as an institution, should be investigated with regard to the way it systematically creates conditions for such crimes. This is also why we cannot explain the sexual scandals in which priests are involved as a manipulation by the opponents of celibacy, who want to make their point that if the priests' sexual urges do not find a legitimate outlet, they have to explode in a pathological way: allowing Catholic priests to marry would not solve anything; we would not get priests doing their job without harassing young boys, since paedophilia is generated by the Catholic institution of priesthood as its 'inherent transgression', as its obscene secret supplement.

The very core of the 'passion for the Real' is this identification with – this heroic gesture of fully assuming – the dirty obscene underside of Power: the heroic attitude of 'Somebody has to do the dirty work, so let's do it!', a kind of mirror-reversal of the Beautiful Soul which refuses to recognize itself in its result. We find this stance also in the properly Rightist admiration for the celebration of heroes who are ready to do the necessary dirty work: it is easy to do a noble thing for one's country, up to sacrificing one's life for it – it is much more difficult to commit a crime for one's country... Hitler knew very well how to play this double game apropos of the Holocaust, using Himmler to spell out the 'dirty secret'. In his speech to the SS leaders in Posen on October 4 1943, Himmler spoke quite openly about the mass killing of the Jews as 'a glorious page in our history, and one that has never been written and never can be written'; he explicitly included the killing of women and children:

We faced the question: what should we do with the women and children? I decided here too to find a completely clear solution. I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men... that is to say, to kill them or have them killed – and to allow the avengers in the shape of children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth.<sup>13</sup>

The very next day, the SS leaders were ordered to attend a meeting where Hitler himself gave an account of the state of the war; here, Hitler did not have to mention the Final Solution directly – oblique references to the SS leaders' knowledge and to their shared complicity, were enough: 'The entire German people know that it is a matter of whether they exist or do not exist. The bridges have been destroyed behind them. Only the way forward remains.'<sup>14</sup> And, ideally, it is along these lines that we can oppose the 'reactionary' and the 'progressive' passion for the Real: while the 'reactionary' one is the endorsement of the obscene underside of the Law, the 'progressive' one is confrontation with the Real of the antagonism denied by the 'passion for purification', which – in both its versions, the Rightist and the Leftist – assumes that the Real is touched in and through the destruction of the excessive element which introduces antagonism. Here, we should abandon the standard metaphors of the Real as the terrifying Thing that is impossible to confront face to face, as the ultimate Real concealed beneath the layers of imaginary and/or symbolic Veils: the very idea that, beneath the deceptive appearances, there lies hidden some ultimate Real Thing too horrible for us to look at directly

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45: Nemesis*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 2001, pp. 604–5.

<sup>14</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 606.

is the ultimate appearance — this Real Thing is a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency ('antagonism'). Take Nazi ideology: the Jew as its Real is a spectre evoked in order to conceal social antagonism — that is, the figure of the Jew enables us to perceive social totality as an organic Whole. And does not the same go for the figure of Woman—Thing inaccessible to the male grasp? Is she also not the ultimate Spectre enabling men to avoid the constitutive deadlock of the sexual relationship?

It is here that one should introduce the notion of *Homo sacer* recently developed by Giorgio Agamben:<sup>15</sup> the distinction between those who are included in the legal order and *Homo sacer* is not simply horizontal, a distinction between two groups of people, but more and more also the 'vertical' distinction between the two (superimposed) ways of how the same people can be treated — briefly: on the level of Law, we are treated as citizens, legal subjects, while on the level of its obscene supplement, of this empty unconditional law, we are treated as *Homo sacer*. Perhaps, then, the best motto for today's analysis of ideology is the line quoted by Freud at the beginning of his *Interpretation of Dreams: Acheronta movebo* — if you cannot change the explicit set of ideological rules, you can try to change the underlying set of obscene unwritten rules.

<sup>15</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1998.

## 2

## REAPPROPRIATIONS: THE LESSON OF MULLAH OMAR

Our preliminary reaction is that the shattering impact of the September 11 attacks can be accounted for only against the background of the border which today separates the digitalized First World from the Third World 'desert of the Real'. It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction. In this paranoiac perspective, the terrorists are turned into an irrational abstract agency — abstract in the Hegelian sense of subtracted from the concrete socio-ideological network which gave birth to it. Every explanation which evokes social circumstances is dismissed as covert justification of terror, and every particular entity is evoked only in a negative way: the terrorists betray the true spirit of Islam, they do not express the interests and hopes of the poor Arab masses. . . . In the days after September 11, the media reported that not only English translations of the Koran but also books about Islam and Arab culture in general became instant best-sellers: people wanted to understand what Islam is, and it is safe to surmise that the vast majority of those who wanted to understand Islam were not anti-Arab racists, but people eager to give

Islam a chance, to get a feel for it, to experience it from the inside, and thus to redeem it — their desire was to convince themselves that Islam is a great spiritual force which cannot be blamed for the terrorist crimes. Sympathetic as this attitude may be (and what can be ethically more appealing than, in the midst of a violent confrontation, trying to put oneself inside the opponent's mind, and thus to relativize one's own standpoint?), it remains a gesture of ideological mystification *par excellence*: probing into different cultural traditions is precisely *not* the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks. Is not the fact that Western leaders, from Bush to Netanyahu and Sharon, repeat like a mantra how Islam is a great religion, which has nothing to do with the horrible crimes committed in its name, a clear sign that something about this praise is wrong? When, in October 2001, the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, made his famous 'slip of the tongue' and, to the consternation of Western liberals, claimed that human rights and freedoms emerged from the Christian tradition, which is clearly superior to Islam, his stance was, in a way, much more to the point than other leaders' disgustingly patronizing liberal respect for the Other's spiritual depth.

Recently, comments like 'The End of the Age of Irony' have abounded in our media, pushing home the notion that the age of a postmodern deconstructive sliding of sense is over: now once again we need firm and unambiguous commitments. Unfortunately, Jürgen Habermas himself (in his speech of acceptance upon receiving the German publishers' prize in October 2001) joined this chorus, emphasizing that postmodern relativism's time is over. (If anything, the events of September 11 indicate the utter impotence of Habermasian ethics — should we say that there is 'distorted communication' between Muslims and the liberal West?) Along the same lines, Rightist commentators like George Will also immediately proclaimed the end of

the American 'holiday from history' — the impact of reality shattering the isolated tower of the liberal tolerant attitude and the Cultural Studies focus on textuality. Now, we are forced to strike back, to deal with real enemies in the real world. . . . However, *whom* do we strike? Whatever the response, it will never hit the right target, bringing us full satisfaction. The ridicule of America attacking Afghanistan is a case in point: if the greatest power in the world bombards one of the poorest countries, in which peasants barely survive on barren hills, is this not the ultimate case of impotent acting out? Afghanistan is otherwise an ideal target: a country that is already reduced to rubble, with no infrastructure, repeatedly destroyed by war for the last two decades. . . . We cannot avoid the surmise that the choice of Afghanistan was also determined by economic considerations: is it not the best procedure to act out one's anger at a country for which no one cares and where there is nothing to destroy? Unfortunately, the choice of Afghanistan cannot fail to recall the anecdote about the madman who searches for a lost key beneath a streetlamp; asked why there, when he lost the key in a dark corner, he answers: 'But it's easier to search under a strong light!' Is not the ultimate irony that prior to the US bombing, the whole of Kabul already looked like downtown Manhattan after September 11? The 'war on terrorism' thus functions as an act whose true aim is to lull us into the falsely secure conviction that nothing has really changed.

It is already a journalistic cliché that a new form of war is now emerging: a high-tech war in which precision bombing, and so on, does the job, without any direct intervention by ground forces (if they are needed at all, this job can be left to 'local allies'). Old notions of face-to-face combat, courage, and so on, are becoming obsolete. We should note the structural homology between this new warfare-at-a-distance, where the 'soldier' (a computer specialist) pushes buttons hundreds of



miles away, and the decisions of managerial bodies which affect millions (IMF specialists dictating the conditions a Third World country has to meet in order to deserve financial aid; WTO regulations; corporate boards deciding about necessary 'restructuring'); in both cases, abstraction is inscribed into a very 'real' situation – decisions are made which will affect thousands, sometimes causing terrifying havoc and destruction, but the link between these 'structural' decisions and the painful reality of millions is broken; the 'specialists' taking the decisions are unable to imagine the consequences, since they measure the effects of these decisions in abstract terms (a country can be 'financially sane' even if millions in it are starving).

And today's 'terrorism' is simply the counterpoint to this warfare. The true long-term threat is further acts of mass terror in comparison with which the memory of the WTC collapse will pale – acts that are less spectacular, but much more horrifying. What about bacteriological warfare, what about the use of lethal gas, what about the prospect of DNA terrorism (developing poisons which will affect only people who share a specific genome)? In contrast to Marx, who relied on the notion of the fetish as a solid object whose stable presence obfuscates its social mediation, we should assert that fetishism reaches its acme precisely when the fetish itself is 'dematerialized', turned into a fluid 'immaterial' virtual entity; money fetishism will culminate with the passage to its electronic form, when the last traces of its materiality have disappeared – it is only at this stage that it will assume the form of an indestructible spectral presence: I owe you 1,000 dollars, and no matter how many material notes I burn, I still owe you 1,000 dollars – the debt is inscribed somewhere in virtual digital space. . . . Does not the same also hold for warfare? Far from pointing towards the twentieth-century warfare, the WTC twin towers explosion and collapse in September 2001 were, rather, the last spectacular cry of

twentieth-century warfare. What awaits us is something much more uncanny: the spectre of an 'immaterial' war where the attack is invisible – viruses, poisons which can be anywhere and nowhere. On the level of visible material reality, nothing happens, no big explosions; yet the known universe starts to collapse, life disintegrates.

We are entering a new era of paranoid warfare in which the greatest task will be to identify the enemy and his weapons. In this new warfare, the agents assume their acts less and less publicly: not only are 'terrorists' themselves no longer eager to claim responsibility for their acts (even the notorious al-Qaeda did not explicitly appropriate the September 11 attacks, not to mention the mystery about the origins of the anthrax letters); 'antiterrorist' state measures themselves are clouded in a shroud of secrecy – all this forming an ideal breeding-ground for conspiracy theories and generalized social paranoia.

And is not the obverse of this paranoid omnipresence of the invisible war its desubstantialization? Just as we drink beer without alcohol or coffee without caffeine, we are now getting war deprived of its substance – a virtual war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a video game, a war with no casualties (on our side, at least). With the spread of the anthrax panic in October 2001, the West got the first taste of this new 'invisible' warfare in which – an aspect we should always bear in mind – we, ordinary citizens, are totally dependent on the authorities for information about what is going on: we see and hear nothing; all we know comes from the official media. A superpower bombing a desolate desert country and, at the same time, hostage to invisible bacteria – this, not the WTC explosions, is the first image of twenty-first-century warfare. Instead of a quick acting out, we should confront some difficult questions: what will 'war' mean in the twenty-first century? Who will 'they' be if they are,

clearly, neither states nor criminal gangs? Here I cannot resist the temptation to recall the Freudian opposition of the public Law and its obscene superego double: along the same lines, are not 'international terrorist organizations' the obscene double of the big multinational corporations – the ultimate rhizomatic machine, omnipresent, albeit with no clear territorial base? Are they not the form in which nationalist and/or religious 'fundamentalism' accommodated itself to global capitalism? Do they not embody the ultimate contradiction, with their particular/exclusive content and their global dynamic functioning?

An emblematic (post-) Yugoslav Serb film, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (Srdjan Dragojević, 1996), somehow prefigures this shift in the figure of the Enemy.<sup>16</sup> The story takes place during the first winter of the Bosnian war, when a group of Serb army fighters are trapped by Bosnian soldiers in a deserted railway tunnel; between outbreaks of fighting, the soldiers inside and outside the tunnel provoke each other by exchanging nationalist insults. The key feature of the narrative, however, is that this stand-off between the two sides involved in the conflict, which lasts for ten days, is presented entirely from the perspective of those inside the tunnel, the Serb fighters; until the very final denouement, the 'Muslim side' is presented only as an assemblage of what Michel Chion called 'acousmatic voices'; vulgar insults or wild half-animal shouting which are not (yet) attributed to particular visually identified individuals, and thus acquire an all-powerful spectral dimension.<sup>17</sup> The narrative device thus mobilized is, of course, taken from many horror films, and even Westerns, in which a group of sympathetic characters is encircled by an invisible Enemy who is mainly heard and seen only in

<sup>16</sup> I rely here on Pavle Levi's outstanding doctoral thesis 'Disintegration in Frames' (New York University 2002).

<sup>17</sup> See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press 2000.

the guise of fleeting shadows and blurred appearances (from Jacques Tourneur's underrated Western *Apache Drums* to John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13*).<sup>18</sup>

This very formal device compels us, the spectators, to identify with the besieged Serb group, and the fact that Serb soldiers are offered as the viewer's point of identification is further confirmed by a strange feature: although, at the beginning of the film, we see Muslim villages destroyed by violently rampaging Serb soldiers, these soldiers are not those who are later trapped in the tunnel; these soldiers mysteriously just pass through burnt-out villages – no killing seems to take place, no one seems to die... This properly fetishist split (although we, the spectators, know very well that these soldiers must have done their share of killing Muslim civilians, we are not shown this, so that we can continue to believe that their hands are not full of blood) creates the conditions for our sympathetic identification with them. In contrast to the Muslims – an unidentified spectral Entity of insults, threats and wild shouts – the Serbs are thus fully individualized, basically characterized as a bunch of 'crazy but sympathetic' antiheroes. And, as Pavle Levi remarks perspicaciously, the potential subversive dimension of this device (if the Enemy is purely acousmatic, and thus spectral, what if it is just a paranoiac projection of the Serbs themselves, the result of

<sup>18</sup> This implicit reference to Westerns is even more complex, since the film *turns around* the usual perception of Bosnians as the besieged city-dwellers and Serbs as the attacking besiegers starting out a large city (Sarajevo, exemplarily): here, the Serbs are the besieged ones and the Bosnians the attacking besiegers. (And, incidentally, it is Peter Handke who, in his defence of the Serbs, refers to this cliché, giving it a Politically Correct twist: since we know today that Indians (Native Americans) were the 'good guys' defending their country from the invading European colonizers, should we not draw the same conclusion apropos of the Bosnian war and support the Serbs, who here play the role of the Native Americans?)