

The Limits of Tolerance/the Mutability of Tolerance: Thinking about Reality and Representation in an 'Age of Terror'

Theorists have always explained that art as a mode of communication is a way of treating the problem of violence, or of anxiety, or of terror, and that the question is why such an activity is indispensable, in forms which persevere from highest antiquity but which must ceaselessly be reinvented and revolutionized. The reason why is precisely because art is not culture, in the sense of cultural supplement, a prosthetic for "the social tie".¹

1. THEN AND NOW

Etienne Balibar's above statement makes a claim for one of the most important roles of art. While it is true that art as a mode of communication is not only used in response to problems of violence, anxiety and terror, his strong point that art is *not* an appendix of culture is levelled by him as true for all forms of art.

This essay was originally written to accompany the exhibition titled *Thresholds of Tolerance*². The exhibition featured the work of artists whose work over the years has dealt directly with some of the problems of our times; issues that Balibar lists as being central to our times. In that exhibition catalogue the idea of 'tolerance' came under scrutiny via the words of the writers, as well as via the images of the artists.

The word 'tolerance' relates to a patient disposition – a demeanour that accepts endurance uncomplainingly; the term conjures attitudes of quiet perseverance, of calmness in waiting. All of which may seem like fiddling while Rome burns in terms of the current 'age of terror'.

As a way of thinking through this essay I somehow fell upon an approach where I found myself looking more closely at the words of poets and writers rather than the images of visual artists. I'm not sure why; perhaps it had something to do with the fact that so much of the interpretation of representation in the age of terror has been dominated in contemporary visual art by the

writing of one man – Jean Baudrillard. Although this dominance may be generated by the re-evaluation of his work that has followed his very recent death, it is also due to the almost immediate infamy of his response to the events of 9/11 in *Der Spiegel*. A number of other important philosophers, notably Jacques Derrida³, Jürgen Habermas⁴, and Paul Virilio⁵ have in recent years contributed to the debate on terror and its implications for philosophy in our time. Nevertheless, even the analysis of images in this time appears so heavily influenced by Baudrillard's overarching interpretation of the event of 9/11 that it seems to make sense to listen to other voices, other words, by other artist-poet-philosophers writing in times of conflict not too far distant. This essay is an attempt to seek for parallels and disjunctures in the ways that they dealt with their own dilemmas about the role of the artist in times of conflict, and to see whether these disjunctures or gaps might suggest possibilities for thinking through the impasse of our time.

2. 'THE TRUTH': REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

In the opening lines of his poem *The Truth*⁶, Pablo Neruda expresses the desire shared by so many artists that their work might be able to bring together a sense of the time in which they have lived, and their response to that time:

Realism, idealism: how I dote on you both,
like water and rock,
both
parts of my world,
light and the tree of life packing its roots underground.

And I pray that my eyes never shut,
even for death:
I who need all my vision to learn,
see at first hand, and interpret my dying.

Need my mouth
to sing in the aftermath when the mouth comes to nothing:
my body as well as my soul, and the arms
that replenish our loving, beloved, as before.

All of it hopeless, I know – but I dote on it still.

Neruda's paean to his love of both realism and idealism acknowledges the compelling impossibility that is harboured in the struggle to make art capable of responding to the magnitude of *the experience* of its age. And his words also articulate the improbable hope of the artist that the artwork may continue to resonate beyond the present to nourish the future. The improbability of the hope makes it all the more sweet, all the more seductive. He demands of his craft – his idealism – a commitment to engage with the real in a way that can provide both sustenance and solace for the future. This demand harbours the secret hope that there may, even, be a way through to the future through the very act of dealing with the present.

Neruda's eloquent words echo an ongoing tradition of artists who have chosen to continue to work in the full face of their realisation of the mesmerising futility of art's role. It is this acknowledged incommensurability of art to deal with the experience of reality that makes Neruda's writing so poignant and at the same time so compelling; a kind of utterance of hopelessness that is defiant in the very act of its abandonment of hope.

The past is punctuated by not only utterances but images that have been created at this juncture – those images that forestall indefinitely the tidal wash of annihilation – Goya's *The Disasters of War*, the haunting humanity in the work of Käthe Kollwitz, Picasso's *Guernica*. But the subject of war is not the sole theme of such works; the seductive hiatus between representation and the real has emerged as the most compelling of conundrums within a range of subject matter – from attempts to make spiritual matters visible in religious paintings⁷ to attempts to make the link between the living and the not-living in as deceptively simple a subject matter as still-life.⁸

Towards the end of his poem Neruda inserts a stanza that is held in place via the sloping cut of italics. The change in font serves as a kind of visual shock – the stanza seems to stand alone as a slice of warning, a reminder incised like a precise wound into the body of the poem:

*The real? It is there,
never doubt it – the power of the real to augment
and enlarge us, to make our teeth chatter,
still able to write on the card of our hunger
an order of bread and an order of soul for the table.*

Here Neruda's equivocation, his prevarication, his stalling even as he writes the lines, seems to have echoes in the unconfessed moment of hesitancy-within-profound-doubt that can be found in the writing of Beckett or Eliot or Brecht.

And if works such as these can be understood, in part, as memorials to the emptied-out meaning of life, as elegies to futility, then it can also be said that each of them seems to prepare spaces where the writing has been allowed for a moment to stammer – to catch its tongue – to elongate the moment before the numbing, inevitable moment of returning-to-itself. At such points writing functions as a space that invites a little silence before the lapse into total silence is complete.

And yet, how antiquated this anguished plea for the real sounds against the deafening cacophony of critical responses to the 'age of terror', in which so many interminable discussions on the endless deferral of 'the real' collapse into flaccid self-solecisms.

The analyses of Jean Baudrillard have dominated attempts to articulate what this 'new' age might mean, what it might look like, and how it might be mediated. So much debate about what responses might be possible in the aftermath of the single event that has come to stand as the symbol that epitomises the era has circled around Baudrillard's assertion that the real and fiction are inextricably folded into a heavily seamed entity. He writes:

But does reality really prevail over fiction? If it seems so, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become fiction itself. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image...It is as if they duel, to find out which is the most unimaginable.⁹

Baudrillard posits the violence of the terrorist attack on 9/11 as 'worse' than reality – he identifies it as symbolic, as belonging to a realm that goes over and above experience – that frames and structures and presses experience flat. The dark hugeness of the real that is there like a deep lower heartbeat at the very core of Neruda's work has been replaced by an interpretation of the real that is more akin to a surface sheen – a veneer that seeks to reflect and refract the fiction of illusion. There seems to be a dispassionate coolness or an ironic distance to this analysis that seems impervious to Neruda's reminder to never doubt the ability of the real to act with a power capable as much of augmentation as of threat.

Instead, Baudrillard's interpretation of the conflict of this era is of a compressed, consciously re-presented spectacle. He emphasises the intertwined roles of media and terrorism in producing a representation of a 'deathless' war that is dependent on a series of spectacular productions that stand in for war itself. He talks of this age of terror as the fourth World War – a war that haunts and affects every corner of our daily lives.

3. TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE

Set against the media hype that provides an ongoing background of white noise to this 'new' era, Baudrillard's assessment of possible reasons for 9/11 could in a sense be interpreted as a model of tolerance. His writing steadfastly refuses to attach blame to the event. When charged, in his famous interview with *Der Spiegel*, with deflecting attention from the fact that the attack was a criminal act, and even with blaming the United States for "rousing the desire for its own destruction", Baudrillard responded with a defence, if not a retraction, of his refusal to blame the terrorists. In so doing, Baudrillard's argument argues for terrorism as an inevitable outcome of a globalisation that has reduced everything into "a negotiable, quantifiable exchange value". However, his concentration on the symbolic nature of the attack on the Twin Towers is so intense that the intensity of the focus blurs the potential for any peripheral action to be considered – the specificity of realities that may exist at other sites never arises. In terms of his writing, the entire world is in the grip of the media, and that threat exceeds any others.

There is a strong sense that Baudrillard's analysis is spoken from a place over and above the commotion of the Western world's struggle to 'make sense' of the event. It is as if he holds his response in a flight pattern of ever diminishing circles, refusing to land on any specific considerations of context that might suggest cause and refusing to make any direct contact with any realities of affect.

If Baudrillard's writing epitomises a cool clarity and a model of tolerance in that he refuses to blame, then perhaps the epitome of intolerance lies in the writing of the poet Artaud who, during another war in another place, took on the events and the outcomes and his disgust at the society that had caused them in a totally personalised way. If Artaud had a pessimistic view of the times in which he lived, he was as much in revolt against the outmoded traditions of his craft. Unlike Baudrillard, he believed that text had played a strong role in tyranny over meaning and reality. On March 29, 1943 Antonin Artaud wrote to Frederic Delanglade:

You saw with your own eyes that I am here at the center of a fearful battle, where heaven and hell do not cease to clash at every hour of the day and night; for as you have long felt in your heart and in your soul, we are in a crucial period of the world's history.¹⁰

Artaud took on the torment of the outside world as an inner responsibility, as Jean-François Chevrier points out:

To the very end of his life, Artaud did not cease to imagine himself in a war, given to battle, destined to lead an incessant struggle to remake life in his own body: "Only perpetual war explains a peace which is but passing," he writes in *Van Gogh*.¹¹

Artaud's artistic expression can be seen as an attempt to embody the vortex of artistic muteness in the face of the horrors and trauma of war; and to use that non-verbal void as the locus to produce an extraordinary counter-offensive. Through mimicry of all those aspects of fragmentation, absence, nothingness and delirium of that time, he reinvented an expression that is as violent and palpable as the time from which it was spawned. Chevrier writes:

This is the rigor of Artaud's writing, violent in proportion to the culture it unthinks, cultivated in proportion to the violence which it expends to destroy the frozen forms of culture.¹²

There is a sense in which Artaud's expressive, passionate and even convulsive responses to the era in which he lived can be explained as his *intolerance for the tolerance* of his time.¹³ The violence of Artaud's work is extreme in proportion to the passive violence of moral puritanism that he understood had to be blown apart by creative physicality if an audience was to be brought out of their desensitisation in order to confront themselves and the outcomes of their actions.

4. INTOLERANCE OF INTOLERANCE

Since September 11, 2001, each of our days has been marked by daily accounts of outbreaks of 'terror': cameos of little skirmishes, a bomb going off, descriptions of the ongoing slow friction of occupied territories. And since that date, since the morning the satellites beamed back the images of the burning buildings of the Twin Towers, the off-shore-ness of it all has gradually seeped through the screen of 'elsewhere' and into the ways we construct our own personal lives. For, daily, we are reminded that we must be vigilant, we must be afraid, and that we must leave the action to be decided by those who are best qualified to identify and define the spectres of elusive meaning behind the daily rumours of the pandemic. Questions about who those might be are not invited.

It is told to us as if it is a new thing. We are told that this global war on terror involves us all, and that those things that we hold most dear to us are the things that define us from that other thing that perpetually threatens to take it away. That other thing – that otherness – cannot be clearly defined. It has come to be associated with a wraithlike phantasm of the Islamic world, and it inevitably seems associated with a vague concept of the 'Middle East'.

But, overall, it seems to be most able to be associated with a concept of ‘out there’ – that place, any place, beyond a ‘homeland’ and ‘security’.

The porous and liminal borders that define such concepts have been tightened up. Security checks and surveillance have been stepped up in almost every aspect of our daily lives, from aeroplane terminals to shopping malls to workplaces.

It may seem, therefore, a good time to be tolerant; a good time to exhibit patience and fairness to those whose practice or opinions are not one’s own. Tolerance is expected as the privacy of our daily lives is eroded. Tolerance can work in favour of a system that invites complacency and obedience and a willing surrender to an enforced order.

The question hovers: which opinions and practices that are not our own should we meet by tolerance?

For the outcomes of the freeze-by-terror are that there are no longer any ‘sides’ that can be morally and ethically taken. The side of terrorism is morally unsustainable, as is an acceptance of the real ramifications of globalisation. Zero-tolerance for either.

Or, perhaps, total tolerance for all.

Theories about impasse as an appropriate response to a system that is imploding have been dominated by Baudrillard’s viewpoint that explains the event of 9/11 as an almost *natural* entropy. His writing interprets all acts of terrorism as unavoidable outcomes arising from the totalising global system; as outcomes that are set within the system itself. In Baudrillard’s analysis, the terrorism that we have today is different from any acts of terrorism before the event of 9/11; it is devoid of ideology, empty of revolutionary spirit and lacking in any struggle for equality. Instead, Baudrillard describes, it is akin to a virus – as something that sits at the very heart of the culture that fights it, and even, at the very heart of the human species itself.¹⁴ But it is at this point that his argument seems most similar to the kind of universalising traits he most abhors – here there is a sense in which the inevitability of the terror is something that little can be done about. This interpretation suggests that all the old frameworks for conflict – an identifiable enemy, demarcation lines, frontiers for battle – are all redundant, and that, therefore, any self-declared ‘war against terror’ is futile.

Where, then, do the margins for activity lie in terms of responses to a global situation described as devoid of any moral and ethical implications? Inbuilt within this explication is a kind of self-regulating ennui – a terror-freeze where inevitability seems to have gained the upper hand. In his foreword to the online version of the *Der Spiegel* interview, Gary Genosko laments the endlessly onanistic tendencies of theoretical musings about the event where he writes:

Even this argument about the deterrence of the real by TV virtuality has become just another story angle for self-promoting high-brow columnists. I am as guilty as the rest. The question is to what degree can this accommodation of the war’s hijacking by mass mediation allow for some creative, affirmative, counter-mobilization, an escape from this estrangement from the real and the maternal massage with which television placates us.¹⁵

Yet it is not easy to dismiss Baudrillard’s argument so wholeheartedly. And Baudrillard himself resists any charges of pessimism or fatalism. He makes clear that, although he remains committed to the conviction that any attempts to combat *evil* might be senseless, his personal

goals of working towards “clarity” and “a lucid consciousness” remain intact. And this is the point at which Baudrillard’s act of refusing to stop writing seems to share something with the voices of Neruda and Artaud, and with the work of artists who have continued to work through and against the hijacking of sense and sensation throughout the ages.

5. ART AND POISON

There is another interpretation of the word tolerance: in its medical sense, tolerance is related to an ability to *resist* the action of a drug or a poison. In this sense the word suggests a more active potential than that of mere acceptance. It is in this sense that the word seems to suggest more productive possibilities than simply that of patience. And in terms of considerations about the values of tolerance in ‘an age of terror’, it may be the interpretation that suggests a more fruitful way forward.

Neruda’s writing calls for a poetic silence that makes the political audible. He writes as a poet who hunts down those junctures where poetics and politics intersect. He writes with a hunger to whisper out the secrets of his times, to write against the stiffened slander of the era in which he finds himself. He writes:

Whisper it out! I say
to the virginal forest:
speak your secret in secret; and to truth: never withhold what you know
lest you harden the truth in a lie.

Artaud’s call for truth is also at the intersection of poetics and politics, even though it is of a more raw nature; a scream from the belly and bowels:

amid the fumes,
amid the special humors of the atmosphere, on the particular axes
of atmospheres wrenched violently and synthetically from the
resistances of a nature which has known nothing of war except
fear.

And war is wonderful, isn’t it?

For it’s war, isn’t it, that the Americans have been preparing for
and are preparing for this way step by step.¹⁶

Artaud wholeheartedly rejected all forms of organised politics and refused to join the French Communist Party, a stance that contributed to his expulsion by the Surrealists. His life reads like a series of rejection letters from publishing houses alternated by admission invitations to mental asylums. However, he remained committed to the power of theatre, and his refusal to denounce it as a bourgeois and decadent art form was another reason for his rejection by the Surrealists.

Neruda, on the other hand, used political positions as another aspect of his role – during his life he held a number of political positions including a number of honorary consulships that took him to a range of destinations around the globe.¹⁷

Neruda’s use of language is precise and poised; Artaud’s use of language incorporated screams, cries and guttural outpourings that both tore language apart at the same time it reinvented it.

Perhaps the only things that these writers share are their passion against the destructive forces of their era; and their commitment to their role as artists. And their belief that the act of making art that cries against the tyranny of its age, however apparently futile, can stave off the inevitable descent into nothingness for a few more stanzas.

- 1 Etienne Balibar, 'Globalization/Civilization', in Jean-François Chevrier and Catherine David (eds), *Politics-Poetics – documenta x – the book* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje-Cantz Verlag, 1997), 782.
- 2 Caroline Turner and David Williams, *Thresholds of Tolerance* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre and School of Art Gallery, Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University, ANU School of Art Gallery, ANU School of Art, 10 May-5 June 2007, National Museum of Australia, 6 June 2007).
- 3 See Giovanna Borradori, "9/11 and Global Terrorism: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida" at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/derrida/derrida911.html> as last accessed on 20 September 2007.
- 4 See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Excerpt at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/066649.html> as last accessed on 20 September 2007.
- 5 Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear* (New York: Continuum, 2003).
- 6 Pablo Neruda, *The Truth*, in *Pablo Neruda. Five Decades: A Selection*, trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1974).
- 7 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: dissemblance & figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 8 Norman Bryson's eloquent consideration of the ways in which still-life has been used as a means of addressing the fundamental questions of human existence traces the history of the genre to the frescoes and mosaics of Pompeii, where the magical transformation between the sacred and the profanity of everyday objects was a powerful vehicle for suggesting ideas. See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) .
- 9 Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Rachel Bloul, School of Social Sciences, ANU, at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0111/msg00083.html>, page 8 of 10, as last accessed on 20 September 2007.
- 10 Letter to Frederic Delanglade, March 29, 1943, O.C.X, p 21, quoted in Jean-François Chevrier, "The Spiral: Artaud's Return to Poetry", in *Politics-Poetics – documenta x – the book* (Ostfildern-Ruit Germany: Hatje-Cantz Verlag, 1997), 38.
- 11 Chevrier, "The Spiral", 40.
- 12 Chevrier, "The Spiral", 41.
- 13 As Glen Barclay has pointed out: "But how much tolerance of any kind was available anywhere in 1943? This was the year of the last German offensive in the East, the year of the Battle of Kursk, the year of the beginning of the British destruction of German cities by terror bombing, the beginning of the German slide to defeat, the Holocaust, etc. And Artaud was at the time of writing in a psychiatric hospital in Vichy France." (Quoted from an email to the author, 28 March 2007.)
- 14 Gary Genosko, "Introduction: Have You Seen the War?", in "This is the Fourth World War: The Der Spiegel Interview With Jean Baudrillard", *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, 1 (1), January 2004, (<http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/spiegel.htm>) as last accessed on 20 September 2007.
- 15 Genosko, "Introduction: Have You Seen the War?", 6.

- 16 *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, a radio play by Antonin Artaud, at <http://www.iki.fi/~kartturi/tekstit/artaud.htm> as last accessed on 14 March 2007.
- 17 In a series of honorary consulships, Neruda travelled to Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Java, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Barcelona and Madrid between 1927 and 1935. He was appointed consul for the Spanish emigration in 1939 and shortly after he was appointed Consul-General in Mexico. Neruda was also elected in 1945 to the position of Senator of the Republic and was a member of the Communist Party of Chile. See http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-bio.html as last accessed on 15 February 2007.

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