

# Past imperfect: future tense. The response of art in a time of crisis

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This essay examines the effects of 'global terrorism' in terms of former terrorisms and questions the extent to which contemporary art can offer an appropriate fulcrum for reconsideration the impact of such regimes on our daily lives.

This essay was originally written to accompany an exhibition *Future Tense: Security and Human Rights* that was exhibited at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University between 26th August to the 11<sup>th</sup> August, 2006. The exhibition coincided with the ARC Asia Pacific Futures Network conference *Towards a Secure Future in the Asia Pacific*.

The exhibition was curated by Dr. Caroline Turner, ANU, Simon Wright, Director Griffith Artworks and Pat HOFFIE. The artists included in the exhibition were Gordon Bennett, Wong Hoy Cheong, Dang Christanto, Tran Luong, eX de Medici, John Pule, Saira Wasim and Guan Wei.

**Key words:** Indigenous, re-enactment, visual arts

Suppose you are an artist beset by a sense of the cruelty of the world and the fallibility – or worse, criminality – of the ideological systems designed to make that world perfect. Suppose you are a witness to your times but see in the miseries and follies around you something more than particular historical causes and effects, something larger that refracts, as if through a cracked prism, or reflects, as if in a smudged mirror, the workings of a society at war with itself and men and women at war with their own contradictory selves.<sup>1</sup>

## The infection of knowledge

Nobel prize winning author J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* follows the critical journey of a Magistrate in a tiny outpost of an un-named Empire. The journey is both a personal one and an historical unfolding; it follows the cataclysms of a disintegrating Empire and the associated crisis of conscience of the central character.

Both the time and the place of the story are uncertain. The *mise en scene* that describes a 'civilised man' living in regulated comfort in an outlying settlement populated by a few 'natives' easily fits the well-established genre of historical narrative. But there is also a sense in which the novel seems to eerily act as a harbinger for the coming age. And although the setting is clearly far removed from our own particular piece of invaded turf here in Australia, with a little bit of interpretive licence it is not too difficult to read the responses of the Magistrate as metaphors for our own ethical dilemmas in an era where intellectual and creative responses seem imperative.

Written in 1980, the writer's unflinching description of the vortex of violence that engulfs the Magistrate's orderly life seems prescient, as if Coetzee had already been delivered the details of scenes of terror that haunt our present daily lives. As if he was already familiar with the motivations, enactments and responses associated with the events in Abu Ghraib, or with the aftermath of a growing list of civilian bombings, or with the descriptions of skirmishes in countries which are still bitterly engaged in defending the unfolding manifestations of Empire.

As, of course, he was.

Coetzee's early experiences - he was born in Cape Town in 1940 and educated both in South Africa torn apart by apartheid, and in the United States - provided him with more than enough examples of the violence of oppression and terrorism to enable him to re-create a fictional world that all-too-accurately seems to predict future events.

For the mechanisms of terror are age-old, as curator Robert Storr reminds us:

The willingness to believe that terrorism is a total aberration is a mixture of voluntary forgetfulness in the hope of restoring a sense of security and of a simple ignorance of history. In the last century and a half terrorism has in fact been frequent and nearly universal.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere in the same publication Storr infers that the roots of terrorism go back much, much further, and traces examples of ‘terrorist women’ to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, where the sisters Antigone and Ismene, characters from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, head-strongly defy state order. When the state demands punishment for her crimes, Antigone takes her own life in a final act of defiance.

However, in today’s world memory and history are rare commodities. In terms of the daily press, the current ‘global war on terror’ is presented as having emerged as a specific US-led response to the events of 9/11. However, to a number of other countries, this state of crisis – along with a variety of manifestations of terror - has existed as part of daily lives for much, much longer.

Rather than being the catalyst that launched us into the current global crisis of terror, the annihilation of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre may be a more appropriate metaphor for the point at which the ‘war on terror’ metamorphosed into an ideological struggle as well as a protracted military mission led by the US.

And if this is the single event that is most used to herald the onslaught of the ‘war on terror’ in a global sense, then the single event that brought any sense of the implications of contingency with the world order home to Australians was the bombing of two night clubs in Bali on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2002. Of the 202 deaths, 88 were Australian. Almost overnight the sense of being a safe outpost removed at a distance from the hotbeds of ongoing global violence disappeared. Almost overnight Australians were made by the media to feel as though they too might be somehow implicated as targets of an un-specified violence.

In the earliest pages of Coetzee’s novel the Magistrate is brought face to face with the realisation that the order of his world-as-he-knew-it can no longer hold together. And although this awakening was triggered by the proximity of the Empire’s violence into the borders of his own comfortable world, the shattering of his past illusions does not come about through acts performed on him personally. Those follow later. Rather, the complete and irreversible change in his understanding is brought about by himself, on himself. It happens at a point at which he permits his own gradually growing, inescapable awareness to disturb him. And at that moment, he is launched into a new perspective of the world – a perspective that recognises the links between the smallest details of his everyday life to the lives – and deaths – of those around him. This *knowledge*, he realises, is an infection from which he will henceforth never be released.

But it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering.<sup>3</sup>

The Magistrate’s new awareness brings with it all the accompanying costs and responsibilities that such awareness demands. He is almost immediately conscious of the price of this knowledge – it is knowledge which, once partaken, automatically expels the recipient from any Edenic gardens of comfort and complacency. This knowledge is an infection. And, once contracted, it is an infection from which there can be no pharmaceutical cure.

The knowledge that rends the Magistrate's life apart is the knowledge that provides an understanding and acknowledgement of the processes of complicity. It is an understanding that each of us has a tiny burden of responsibility in the face of a tsunami of nihilism.

Knowledge comes from the ability to bring loose facts and data together in a way that makes a provisional and interconnected *sense* of things. In the media-saturated world we live in, knowledge, like memory and history, also seems to be a rare commodity indeed. Instead of a cohesive body of accumulated facts, the presence of information in the form of bytes, facts, statistics and evidence form the loosely bound, floating islets of our everyday lives. For those who attempt to make connections between such rafts of information, and head out to secure some points of anchorage between these free-floating signifiers, there is a swim that must go against a relentless current of 'news'. And for those who try to take refuge for a time from the exhaustion of such data, the thick, fetid swamps of media imagery still lurk to snare any attempts to reach any continents of sense.

Yet this is the journey that artists undertake in their attempts to make connections that are made to seem impossible by the daily narration of everyday events.

They embark on such swims in an effort to re-imagine new possible ways of responding to the world we live in. Like the Magistrate in Coetzee's novel, their sense of the interconnectedness with the world is both a blessing and a curse that few are capable of realising. For most of us, the trip-wire between cause and effect has been broken. The more-or-less comfy stresses of our daily lives seem to exist on a parallel universe to the happenings of the media world – the world-at-war-beyond.

Many contemporary artists are instead driven to respond to this 'infection of knowledge' through illusions of connectedness that make new relationships seem possible. For illusions, it seems, have forever played a key role in imagining who we are, and who we might be. Even in the face of terror.

And who am I to jeer at life-giving illusions? Is there any better way to pass these last day than in dreaming of a saviour with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us a second chance to build our earthly paradise? I lie on the bare mattress and concentrate on bringing into life the image of myself as a swimmer swimming with even, untiring strokes through the medium of time, a medium more inert than water, without ripples, pervasive, colourless, odourless, dry as paper.<sup>4</sup>

### **Ethics or aesthetics? The response of art**

There are those critics who believe that art can offer no appropriate critical response to a culture of violence. That the business of art lies elsewhere.

There are others, like critic Paul Virilio, who perceive processes of violence reflected even in works that attempt to side-step the violent realities of the era in which they were produced. In the publication *Art and Fear*, Virilio makes connections between the reductionism of modernism and the era that spawned it.

For example, others before this have attacked modern art's dance of the seven veils, the stripping of art's subjects and materials down to the bare bones of an insubstantial representation. But it is Virilio who names the process violence, pinpoints the fear that subtends it and makes the connection between this violence and the violence of the battlefields of the Great War, for example, when the first abstract canvases appeared and the human figure was literally and figuratively blasted to bits...<sup>5</sup>

In a text that is fraught with inconsistencies and ambiguities, Virilio seems, nevertheless, to be making a plea for a responsive art that refuses to accept that the continuation of war is inevitable. Rejecting political correctness, and launching a tirade against "the fashionable scientific and artistic idea of the human body as a technologically assisted survival kit that

has out-lasted its usefulness”<sup>6</sup>, Virilio calls for art practice that can respond “with pity” to the situations and horror of the era we live in.

Virilio seems make a call for a renewed practice of the art of empathy; a call for the renewal of skills of responding in ways that are conscious of connectedness. Of compassion. All of which may seem somewhat out of date in an era where dispassionate commentary is at times maintained at the level of an autism that affects our culture at its deepest roots. The vehemence of Virilio’s condemnation of the current age at times topples into an almost incoherent rage:

Whether Adorno likes it or not, the spectacle of abjection remains the same, after as before Auschwitz. But it has become politically incorrect to say so. All in the name of freedom of expression, a freedom contemporary with the terrorist politics Joseph Goebbels described as ‘the art of making possible what seemed impossible’. But let’s dispel any doubt we might still have. Despite the current negationism, freedom of expression has at least one limit: *the call to murder and torture*. Remember the *media of hate* in the ex-Yugoslavia of Slobodan Milosevic? Remember the ‘Thousand Hills Radio’ of the Great Lakes region of Africa calling Rwandans to inter-ethnic genocide? Confronted by such ‘expressionistic’ events, surely we can see what comes next, looming over us as it is: an officially terrorist art preaching suicide and self-mutilation – thereby extending the current infatuation with scarring and piercing. Or else random slaughter, the coming of a THANATOPHILIA that would revive the now forgotten fascist slogan: *VIVA LA MUERTA!*<sup>7</sup>

In Virilio’s sneering and ironic description of the limitless transgressions that abound in recent world politics, he suggests that the understanding of terms such as ‘freedom of expression’ have been terrifyingly transmogrified into the scripted enactments of events such as those he lists. It is as if the will of art to heedlessly transgress boundaries has eclipsed into life.

And if such claims seem far-fetched, then it is chastening to note the importance our own time places on the ways in which the calls to arms are made. The recent move to redescribe the war in terms of an ideological struggle rather than a military mission led to the decision by US Congress to forfeit the term ‘war on terror’ in favour of something more appropriate to changing public responses. President Bush almost immediately overruled the attempt. However the public confession by Congress that all the available ‘tools of statecraft’ would be needed to defeat the so-called ‘enemies of freedom’ suggests that the *imagining* of the global state of terror needs constant and vigilant inventiveness. Senior administration figures within the Bush government are now speaking publicly of the need to construct a ‘battle of ideas’ that might be capable of creating an imaginary construct where the ‘enemies of freedom’ are kept as smoky spectres just outside our range of vision.<sup>8</sup>

Against such claims Virilio’s alleged links between the artistry of terrorism and the events of the late twentieth century seem less far-fetched.

...

The need to keep the enemy faceless, nameless is essential to the role of fostering a state of terror. In Coetzee’s novel, the barbarians that wait on the fringes of the Empire like an invisible force threatening to destroy its order and civility, are as much a figment of the imagination as they are a reality. When one or two are captured, tortured and abandoned to their fate, they seem so far from those semi-human entities that keep the ‘civilised’ awake at night. Up close, identifiable, they seem all-too-vulnerable. All-too-human. The indeterminacy of the barbarians is essential to their capacity to provoke fear.

In Australia, the faces and names of those asylum seekers placed under mandatory detention are kept secret. As are the terms of their sentences. The names of victims lost in the SIEV X maritime tragedy of 2001 are withheld. Signs of the humanity of those we most fear is denied. Similarly, the links between those barbarians and the civilisations of the past are quickly forgotten. The fact that Iraq has had a long and rich Persian heritage, for example, is overwritten by images of nameless individuals *in extremis*. The more formless and un-knowable

the barbarians can be rendered, the more efficiently the state of fear can be maintained and escalated.

For Coetzee's Magistrate, the truth comes almost too late. After attempts at reconciliation with individual outsiders, his realisation comes that that which is most to be feared lies within. And this self-realisation carries with it a toll that comes close to self-destruction as he turns his rage on the Empire that has moulded him:

"*You* are the enemy, Colonel!' I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. '*You* are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given all the martyrs they need – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!"<sup>9</sup>(p125

Against such odds, the production of art that attempts to give features and forms to the real locus of terror, or that attempts to name the names of those rendered invisible, may seem futile.

### **The impossible task of security: terrorism from within**

Why, in an era of media-saturated representations of the atrocities of war, should the response of art be essential? Why, in a world inured to the violence of representation, might we need more imagery by artists? Opinions vary.

In Robert Storr's excellent analysis of the background to and reception of a series of 15 paintings by German artist Gerhard Richter titled *October 18, 1977*, he cites a range of critical responses to the work. The title of the series commemorates the days the bodies of four of the infamous Baader-Meinhof social-activist-turned-terrorist group were found dead or dying in the high-security Stammheim prison near Stuttgart. Controversy raged across Europe about the cause of the deaths of members of the group, and the incident caused the deepest divisions in Germany.

In 1989, when the series was first exhibited publicly, Richter was conscious of the special standing this series had within his own well-established *oeuvre*. He was aware that the choice of radical subject matter by an established artist at the height of his career would appear like an irony sure to attract controversy. And it did. Critical responses to the work included damning indictments of the work's ineffectuality; that, painted and presented so long after the event, the works could do little more than evoke a dark, sentimental pathos.<sup>10</sup> And yet others recognised the redemptive strength of the series in bringing back an historical episode that had been repressed by the state.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most interesting response, however, came from critic Peter Schjeldahl, who identified the tension of the series as coming from "a head-on collision of irresistible estheticism and immovable moralism, the fire of the voyeur and the ice of the puritan".<sup>12</sup> In spite of, or perhaps partly as a result of, the level of controversy the works attracted, international interest in the series was maintained at the highest level as the works continued to be exhibited at prestigious galleries across Europe and the US for two years until they were purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for an undisclosed sum.

The artist's own point of view about his series of painting seems wilfully elusive if not ambivalent. In responses to the statements of critics, he seemed to take pains to always move the debate away from the specific events that surrounded the lives and deaths of the members of the Baader-Meinhof group, and re-position it firmly back towards the cooler subject matter of painting. And yet other statements reveal that his awareness of the impact of the subject matter is clear:

...there's something else that puts an additional fear into people, namely that they themselves are terrorists. And that *is* forbidden. So this terrorism is inside all of us, that's what generates the rage and fear, and that's what I don't

want anymore than I want the policeman inside myself – there’s never just one side to us. We’re always both: the state *and* the terrorist.<sup>13</sup>

The images in Richter’s paintings are based on 12 police and press photographs drawn from a vast archive of images documenting the history of the Baader-Meinhof group and the Red Army Faction. The publication from which this essay quotes, written by Robert Storr when he was Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, was published by the Museum as a means of extending the understanding of the context of the series and in an effort to avoid overburdening the exhibiting of the works with didactic panels and photographic images. It therefore includes a number of reproductions of photographic documentation of the time. Richter’s images famously take on the subject matter of photography and ‘the death of painting’. Yet this particular series stands apart within his *oeuvre* for the way in which he takes the facts and data of events and extends them into images where our capability of making intellectual, emotional, ethical and poetic responses to the tragedy of life and the apparent futility of art hangs in the balance.

The subject matter of violence, terrorism and fear has provided one of the most primary forces for the production of art. Earliest images on cave walls are evidence of attempts to give form and face to fear, in an attempt to both placate the power of terror and master the fear. Witchdoctors and shaman have taken on the invisible and formless presence of terror in the embodiment of ritual... as if the ritualised enactment of the facing of fear can be used as a conduit to manage the forces of fear in ways that are most productive to the community. The images of war and of oppression and of injustice and suffering painted by artists abound throughout art history. From Grünewald to Goya to Golub to the artists included in this exhibition the subject has generated imagery that is unforgettable.

And yet. And yet war rages on. The manufacture of terrorism continues unabated. Why, then, must artists continue to address this subject when the role of art in challenging such extremism seems ineffectual?

Coetzee’s central character is a Magistrate. His role is an arbiter of justice; an ideal that forms the best mechanism civilised people have invented to secure equality in an unjust world. Yet his own revelation includes the central realisation that this, too, is a poor substitute for the *will to imagine* a better world.

‘But we live in a world of laws,’ I said to my poor prisoner, ‘a world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade.’<sup>14</sup>

And the ones who take up the responsibility of keeping memories of justice alive are the artists. Memories of justice, of compassion and memories of the price of fear and terror. Artists allow us brief, liminal glimpses into what we might be. They dare to dream dreams that are, in Virilio’s terms, ‘pitiful’, and dare to unsettle our understanding of who we think we are. They remind us of what each of us is capable of: terror, and hope.

## Notes

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|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | <i>Thirty Years Ago Today</i> , in <i>Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977</i> , Robert Storr, The Museum of Modern Art, 2001, p137   | 3 | <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> , J.M. Coetzee, Vintage 1980, p. 23   |
| 2 | <i>Thirty Years Ago Today</i> , in <i>Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977</i> , Robert Storr, The Museum of Modern Art, 2001, p. 70. | 4 | <i>Ibid</i> , p. 157  |
|   |  | 5 | <i>Translator’s Preface</i> , Julie Rose, 2002, in <i>Art and Fear</i> , Paul Virilio, Continuum, New York, 2003, p. vii. |

- 6 Ibid, p. 13
- 7 Ibid, pp 57, 58.
- 8 Matthew Davis, BBC News, Washington 27/07/05; *President Makes It Clear: Phrase is 'War on Terror'*, Richard W. Stevenson. Grapevine, Texas, The New York Times, Aug. 3, 2005
- 9 Coetzee, *ibid*, p125
- 10 Critic Sophie Schwarz quoted by Storr, p 31.
- 11 Critic Benjamin Buchloch quoted by Storr, p 32.
- 12 Critic Peter Schjeldahl, quoted by Storr, p. 35.
- 13 Artist Gerhard Richter, quoted by Storr, p 134
- 14 Coetzee, *ibid*, p. 152.

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Pat HOFFIE is a practicing artist based in Brisbane. She has worked for the past fifteen years with artists and communities in the Asia-Pacific region on a series of work titled *Fully Exploited Labour*. A survey exhibition of this series was curated for the University of Queensland Art Museum by Tim Morrell last year. She has also worked with Dr. Caroline Turner, formerly the Deputy Director of the Humanities Research Centre from the Australian National University on the ARC funded Art and Human Rights projects. Pat HOFFIE is a Professor at the Queensland College of Art Griffith University where she is Deputy Director, Research and Postgraduate Studies.