

Beyond Horror: Sensationalism and the Hermeneutics of War

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The decade of the nineties was remarkably bloody, given that the world was at relative peace. The sitting president bombed four nations during his tenure. His Secretary of State justified the dramatic rise in the morbidity and mortality of infants and children in countries like Iraq and the former Yugoslavia in terms of the protection of the national interest. (When asked by Leslie Stahl of the TV show “Sixty Minutes” whether the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children as a direct result of U.S. sanctions was worth the price, Mme. Albright replied, “Yes, we think the price is worth it.”¹) Thanks to moment-to-moment coverage by an ever-expanding television medium, we bore witness to riveting carnage in trouble spots such as Panama, El Salvador, China, and Rwanda, to name only a few. Terms like “atrocities,” “ethnic cleansing,” “war crime,” and “genocide” re-entered the discourse of everyday life in ways we would not have anticipated merely ten years ago.

The sheer number of these images, if not their force, insists that those of us who think for a living reflect upon both the trajectory of world events and their representation. We must try to apply the interpretive methods used by both psychoanalysis and critical theory to the texts of war, whether those be of action, image, or written word.² In an effort to make a modest attempt to do just that, I will examine a few of the stories that have emerged from the recent wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. I will explore both their origins and their tenacity as narrative structures, structures that have organized and continue to organize foreign policy and public opinion in the U.S.

Long-time Balkan correspondent Diana Johnstone gives a place to start. Writing in the July/August 1999 issue of *Extra!*, the magazine of FAIR (the journalism watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), Johnstone considers the vocabulary of humanitarianism, which seems to have captured the

¹ Ramsay Clark, “Speech at a Forum at the Community Church on NATO and Kosovo” (New York, 18 February 1999).

² See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

moral sensibilities of the American people and policymakers alike. “The war,” she reminds us, “was launched to protect an oppressed ethnic minority, to punish a massacre, and to secure a New World Order. Which war was that?” she continues. “Why Hitler’s war of course, which came to be known as World War Two. The ostensibly oppressed ethnic minority was the Germans in Slavic countries, the aggression was a fake Polish incursion into Germany denounced as a ‘massacre,’ and the ‘New World Order’ was the declared goal of Nazi Germany.” Her point is to call our attention to the rhetoric Hitler used as a pretext for conquest. It is nearly identical to that used by the United States and its NATO allies in their battle cry against the rather defenseless rump Yugoslav state. Later she continues that the “propaganda that incited Germans to fight told them that they were on a mission to bring good German ‘Western’ order to the world.” To achieve such order, elements of disorder had to be identified and eliminated. Those “elements of disorder” included Jews, Slavs, gypsies (now called Romany), and homosexuals. Johnstone asserts that “if parallels are to be drawn between the present NATO war and the Nazi *blitzkrieg*, some of them could be extremely embarrassing to the NATO allies. But American media have never cared to dwell on the fact that the ‘New World Order’ was a Nazi slogan resurrected by President Bush... nor on the fact that Hitler ordered the bombing of Belgrade to punish it for opposing that ‘Order,’ while rewarding Croatian and Albanian secessionist nationalists with enlarged states from which they proceeded to drive out Serbian inhabitants.”³

Johnstone cautions against the danger of “analogy construction.” The media, she says, swayed by an effective public relations firm (about which I will say more later), took the easy route of resorting to analogy to comprehend a very complex situation. She argues that analogies, when applied to highly charged and unfamiliar subjects, tend to create “semi-fictional” versions which actually serve to obscure reality. This move “virtually precludes serious efforts to grasp why people are acting as they do.”⁴

A serious effort to understand “why people are acting as they do” is a simple way to characterize the hermeneutic agenda. It is an effort to enter into an alien discourse, one from which we are separated by either time or, in this case, geopolitical space. It is an effort to let the symbols of the Other generate new thought in *us*, thought capable of opening up a compassionate interpre-

³ Diana Johnstone, “Holocaust Relativism: ‘Hitler’ Analogies Betray Both Past and Present,” *Extra!* 12, no. 4 (July/August 1999): 15–16.

⁴ Johnstone, 16. For an exceptionally scholarly treatment of the issues raised by Diana Johnstone, see the philosopher John Rosenthal’s article in the February 2000 *Monthly Review*. It is the most thorough that I have seen to date.

tive dimension, a dimension which could result, in times of potential war, in conflict resolution rather than in violence. Just as an interpretive failure leads to an analytic stalemate in the consulting room, a failure to apply a proper hermeneutic strategy at the negotiating table too produces an impasse—that of the regressive dialectic of domination and submission. Obviously, the consequences of war rather dramatically surpass that of an analysis which has, for the moment, run aground.

Hermeneutic theoreticians such as Paul Ricoeur regularly remind us that any interpretive strategy encompasses its own presuppositions.⁵ An interpretation from a position exterior to the universe of meaning to be understood will yield an empty intellectual analysis. To unite explanation with genuine understanding, the interpreter must stand on the interior of the subject to be investigated. To understand a patient, the analyst must inhabit the patient's psychic space. To understand a culture, the anthropologist must live in the world of that culture, all the while maintaining one foot on the terrain of his own customs and beliefs. As in matters of religion, the "hermeneutic circle" is essentially an exercise of faith. To have faith, one must embrace the basic assumptions of that faith.

Traditionally, journalists have functioned like the god Hermes, carrying news messages to their faithful audiences. They have stood on the firm ground of good reporting, which includes strategies of both nearness and distance, identification and "objectivity." Viewers and readers have taken the veracity of reporting on faith. This is not to say that they never doubt what they watch and read. To the contrary. But in general they have not tended to doubt the intention of the journalist to find and to tell the truth. They have taken on the good faith of the reporter. Journalistic audiences have willingly entered the hermeneutic circle, confident that their faithful participation in its embrace would bear the fruit of deeper understanding of events too far from home to submit to personal scrutiny.

But Hermes was also a thief. What happens when the presumption of good faith, the contract between journalist and viewer-reader is violated for reasons of ambition, laziness, personal political orientation, influence by state propaganda, or complicity in the unexamined aims of a special interest group? Johnstone's piece implicitly poses this question. So does an article in the current edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In his "Witness for the Prosecution," free-lance writer S. Austin Merrill asks whether journalists should testify before war crimes tribunals, thereby risking a loss of objectivity and the gain of an unwitting role as intelligence agents for one side in a con-

⁵ See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

flict. Although most American journalists and publications still resist such a role, more Europeans are persuaded to board the rather fast-moving train of what is now known as “advocacy journalism.” One such European is Britain’s Ed Vulliamy, the correspondent for *The Guardian*, named Reporter of the Year for his coverage of Bosnia. Merrill quotes Vulliamy:

There are times in history when neutrality is not neutral. It’s complicit to what’s going on. Omarska was not neutral. Concentration camps are not neutral. To me, neutrality between camp inmate and guard is insidious. Neutrality between a raped woman and the beast who rapes her is not neutral, it is to side with the rapist. My neutrality has gone out the window long ago—morally, personally, professionally, and now legally as well.⁶

Vulliamy’s position is extremely interesting. On the face of it, he makes a cogent and persuasive argument for such a role. Even if one were to find his stance as a journalist questionable, his humanitarian commitment seems indisputably sound. Vulliamy made his reputation on his coverage of the Omarska and Trnopolje camps. Even in disagreement it would seem unthinkable that he had acted in bad faith.

The sensational picture reproduced herein (Figure 2 opposite)⁷ will remind the reader of the shocking coverage of the Bosnian Serb refugee camps during the summer of 1992. First breaking on the evening news of Britain’s channels 4 and ITV on August 6, 1992, it was featured in almost all British national papers by the next day. Quickly moving on to American publications, it became so well known that the picture, and the man pictured, Fikret Alić, became signifiers in the atrocity chain of the Yugoslav conflicts. Alić came to symbolize what people took to be Serbian inhumanity and criminal aggression. The barbed wire behind which he seemed to stand reminded people of the concentration camps of World War Two, thus fortifying the Hitler/holocaust analogy that Johnstone decries.

When the picture broke, its effect was almost instantaneous. That summer saw the release of several disturbing articles, such as Maggie O’Kane’s in the *Guardian*, which claimed eye-witness reports of Muslims carted off in cattle cars, and *Newsday*’s Roy Gutman’s, in which he dubbed the Bosnian Serb detention camp at Omarska a “death camp.” With that kindling already set, the photo of the emaciated man behind barbed wire was a sufficient spark to

⁶ Austin S Merrill, “Witnesses for the Prosecution,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (September/October 1999): 37.

⁷ This image was obtained from internet site <<http://www.informinc.co.uk>>. The site was closed down after court action by ITN in March of 2000.

Figure 2. Fikret Alić in Bosnian Serb refugee camp, 1992

inflame public opinion. British Prime Minister John Major summoned his cabinet into an emergency session which resulted in Britain's decision to send troops into Bosnia. In the United States, candidates Clinton and Gore used the picture to demand military action against the Bosnian Serbs, while in Brussels, NATO officials reacted with a plan for military intervention.⁸

ITN broadcast journalists Penny Marshall, Ian Williams, and cameraman Jeremy Irvin, accompanied by Ed Vulliamy, would seem to have done the world a great service by unmasking the new holocaust that was taking place in the Balkans. A world slow to respond to the suffering of the Muslims at the hands of the Bosnian Serbs was now perched to act. However, the unedited video footage of the ITN excursion to Trnopolje came under the scrutiny of the well-known German journalist Thomas Deichmann. He came to a remarkably different conclusion. After himself investigating the camp at Trnopolje, he wrote the following:

The fact is that Fikret Alic and his fellow Bosnian Muslims were not imprisoned behind a barbed wire fence. There was no barbed wire fence surrounding Trnopolje camp. It was not a prison, and certainly not a 'concentration camp', but a collection center for refugees, many of whom went there seeking safety and could leave again if they wished.

The barbed wire in the picture is not around the Bosnian Muslims; it is around the cameraman and the journalists. It formed part of a broken-down barbed wire fence encircling a small compound that was next to Trnopolje camp. The British news team *filmed from inside this compound*, shooting pictures of the refugees and the camp *through* the compound fence, the resulting pictures left the impression that the Bosnian Muslims were caged behind barbed wire.⁹

Deichmann went on to describe the intense pressure felt by the journalists when Marshall, Williams, and Vulliamy arrived in Bosnia in July of 1992. Gutman's Omarska story had raised network expectations back in London to a new high. He claims that after her return, Penny Marshall described the orders of her managing editors to "do nothing else before they had the camp story in the bag: 'They had set Ian Williams and myself loose with an open-ended brief to find and visit detention camps, and with orders to file nothing

⁸ See Thomas Deichmann, "The Picture That Fooled the World," *LM97* (February 1997): 24–31.

⁹ Deichmann, "The Picture That Fooled the World," 24; emphasis mine.

until we had come up with the story.”¹⁰ Unable to find the story they were after, their last stop was to be Trnopolje. This was, says Deichmann, their last chance to get what their editors wanted.

The Trnopolje pictures were filmed by the crew on August 5 and edited in Budapest the following day. They aired in London that very evening. The broadcast’s focus was the shot of the journalists talking to Alić and fellow Muslims through barbed wire. The rest is history.¹¹

The international media seized the opportunity “to make a symbolic link to the Nazi camps.”¹² Deichmann reports, however, that Ed Vulliamy’s first article on Trnopolje appeared in the *Guardian* the morning just after the ITN broadcast and that it was therefore likely that he was unaware of the edited footage at the time of its writing. Vulliamy did not even mention the barbed wire fence in his piece. His view was, in Deichmann’s estimation, rather “balanced.” He declared that Trnopolje should not be called a “concentration camp”; and he quoted Muslims who had said that no force had been used against them but, to the contrary, that they had found security there. Two years later, though, Vulliamy seemed to be singing a different tune. In his 1994 book *Seasons in Hell*, the reporter described his impressions of Trnopolje like this: “More dirt tracks, more burned villages,... and another startling, calamitous sight: a teeming, multitudinous compound surrounded by barbed wire fencing.”¹³

Roy Gutman won his reputation and a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Omarska “death camp” as well as the story of the mass rapes allegedly systematically perpetrated by the Bosnian Serbs on Muslim women. Headlines screamed that 30,000–50,000 Muslim women had been so abused. Subsequent reports, confirmed by the UN and organizations such as Helsinki Watch, concluded that the total number of rapes was more likely to have been 2,400 evenly distributed among all three warring ethnic factions—about 800 women each among the Muslims, Croats, and Serbs alike.¹⁴ Yet even today, the inflated numbers seem to remain unchanged in public consciousness. Recall Vulliamy’s dramatic statement, cited earlier, that neutrality “between a raped woman and the beast who rapes her is not neutral, it is to side with the

¹⁰ Deichmann, “The Picture That Fooled the World,” 27.

¹¹ See also the video *Judgement*, recently produced by the website <<http://www.emperors-clothes.com>>, for additional evidence which supports Deichmann’s work on the Alić photo. This shows explicitly how the raw images were altered for effect.

¹² Deichmann, “The Picture That Fooled the World,” 27.

¹³ Cited after Deichmann, “The Picture That Fooled the World,” 30.

¹⁴ *Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War*, produced by George Bogdanich and Martin Lettmayer, Frontier Theatre and Film, 1999.

rapist.” Though his reporting was not about the rapes *per se*, in this statement Vulliamy must be locating himself within the context of the rather sensational larger claim, since the actual numbers are only on a par with the peace time rape statistics in Western industrialized nations. How are we to understand this?

It is possible that Gutman and Vulliamy were duped. Additional investigative reporting by Thomas Deichmann and others uncovered the fact that Gutman’s key witness for his rape story was a woman named Jadranka Cigelj, a paid employee of the CIC, the Croatian Information Center, a war propaganda institution that had replaced the former Croatian Ministry of Information of the Zagreb government. Funded by Croatian exiles, the task of the CIC was to feed pro-Zagreb materials to Western journalists, intellectuals, and government representatives. Cigelj, a woman attorney in her forties, claimed to be from both Prijedor and Vukovar. She altered her version of the identity of her rapist, and she changed her name, using aliases as needed. She was considered so unreliable by the War Crimes Tribunal that they rejected her as a witness against Dušan Tadić, despite her having volunteered to provide testimony against him. But Cigelj had befriended Gutman, convincing him that she was credible.¹⁵

A cynical view of the motivations of Gutman and Vulliamy would suggest that they were simply opportunistic. They caught the wave of public opinion and rode its crest to public acclaim. A kinder one is that the power of the holocaust analogy, working both consciously and unconsciously, was too overwhelming for them either to see through or to overcome. Its force simply undermined ordinary hermeneutic standards, thereby creating a profound journalistic failure.¹⁶ It is, of course, enormously curious that the western public was so willing to join journalists in that failure, transforming the Serbs (the only European nation to have resisted Nazification by the Third Reich) into Hitler’s heirs. One should not forget that Hitler bombed Belgrade to punish the Serbs in 1941. In contrast, the Croats, the Muslims, and, significantly, the Albanians, were German allies.

Orwell predicted that the Lie would become the Truth, and in this instance, the Lie had a little help. That warring factions generate propaganda is simply a fact. In the United States, government secrecy in the interest of

¹⁵ Thomas Deichmann. “Roy Gutman, the Pulitzer Prize and Croatian Propaganda,” personal e-mail from the author, 25 October 1999; this information first appeared German in *Novo Magazine* in September 1994.

¹⁶ There were some notable and heroic exceptions to this failure of journalists to represent the Serbian situation honestly. Among them David Binder, Peter Brock, Alex Cockburn, Robert Fisk, Thomas Fleming, Mary Mostert, and Betsy Sullivan stand out.

“national security” has become a virtual institution since the Viet Nam War. And secrets require cover stories to veil the face of truth. In his 1993 publication *The Truth from Yugoslavia Is Not Being Reported Honestly*, Jacques Merlino, formerly of France’s TV 2, exposed the role of Ruder and Finn in the cynical manipulation of public perception of the Serbs.¹⁷ The public relations firm deftly shifted attention away from ugly facts that, if widely known, might have made an important difference in the outcome in the Balkans.

On April 24, 1993, Merlino interviewed Ruder and Finn director James Harff in his Washington D.C. office. In the book, he lets Harff hang himself in his own words:

For eighteen months, in successive sequences, we have worked for the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and for the parliamentary opposition at Kosovo. During this period we have had numerous successes which gave us a formidable international quality image.¹⁸

Describing the tools of the trade, the card-index, computers, faxes, etc., Harff continued:

We can diffuse within a few minutes a specific information to all those likely to react. Our craft consists in disseminating information, to circulate it as fast as possible so that the theses favoring our cause are the first to be expressed. Speed is an essential element. As soon as an item of information favors us, we owe it to ourselves to sink it into public opinion at once. *Since we know perfectly well it is the first assertion that really counts. All denials are entirely ineffective* [emphasis mine].

He goes on to enumerate the hundreds of calls made to individuals well-placed in the media, congress, and the White House, including ones to then Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, George Mitchell, Bob Dole, and Al Gore. Merlino then asked Harff what made him the most proud. Harff replied:

To have succeeded in moving the Jewish opinion to our side. The game was extremely delicate and, on that side, the dossier involved a

¹⁷ See Jacques Merlino, *Les Vérités Yougoslaves Ne Sont Pas Toutes Bonnes à Dire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

¹⁸ The quotations from Merlino’s publication are translated by Raymond K. Kent, Professor Emeritus, University of California at Berkeley.

major danger. Because President Tudjman was too imprudent in his book *Bespuca: Povjesne Zbiljnosti* (Wastelands: Historical Truth). A reading of his texts could find him guilty of anti-Semitism. It was no better on the Bosnian side since President Izetbegovich, in his *Islamska Deklaracija* (Islamic Declaration), published in 1970 [republished in 1990], grounded himself too firmly in the quest for a Muslim fundamentalist state [in Bosnia]. Moreover, the pasts of Croatia and Bosnia were marked by a very real and cruel anti-Semitism.

Several tens of thousands of Jews perished in Croatian camps. There were all sorts of reasons why the Jewish intellectuals and organizations were hostile to the Croats and Bosnians. Our challenge was to obtain a reversal of this situation and we succeeded in doing it in a magisterial manner between 2 and 5 August 1992 when *New York Newsday* came out with the lead story of [Serbian] camps. We jumped on it and convened three major Jewish organizations: B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress. We suggested to them to print an insert in the *New York Times*, and organize a protest manifestation in front of the UN building. This really worked: the engagement of Jewish organizations on the side of Bosnians [Bosnian Muslims] was a super poker play. Immediately thereafter, we were able to associate the Serbs with the Nazis in public opinion. The dossier was a complex one, [but] in a single shot we were able to offer a simple story, a history of the good guys and the bad guys. We knew that this is where the game would have to be played out. And, we have won, targeting the Jewish audience, the right target. It was not long before there was a clear change in the press language as emotional terms like ethnic cleansing and concentration camps arrived, all evoking Nazi Germany, the gas chambers at Auschwitz. The emotional charge was so powerful that no one could go against it without being accused of revisionism. We really batted a 1000 in full.

Merlino then pointed out that during the period between 2 August and 5 August 1992, there was no proof of those claims. Harff replied that they only made it widely known that *Newsday* had made the claim that there were Serbian death camps. Merlino then asked a question regarding the responsibility of such claims. Harff answered:

We are paid professionals. We had a job to do and we did it. We are not paid to moralize. And when the time comes to start a debate on all

of this we will have a clear conscience. For, if you wish to prove that Serbs are in fact poor victims, go ahead. You will be quite alone.¹⁹

In effect, James Harff openly stated that he used the signifiers of the holocaust as rhetorical devices to exploit a vulnerability in the American Jewish community. He did so in order to arouse anti-Serbian sentiment because he was paid to do so. Relying upon the impact of first impressions, he created a false narrative with sufficient internal coherence and power that he successfully obscured a more complicated and truthful story. There were, for example, Muslim-run detention camps holding Serbs.²⁰ These camps were still operating at the time the Dayton Agreement was signed. Apparently without compunction, Harff cruelly fooled the Jews, inspiring them to endorse a course of political action by the United States which ultimately resulted in the bombing of their own people, the Belgrade Jewish community, during Passover of 1999. He was just doing his job. But his bad faith made a mockery of the hermeneutic agenda.

Of course, the Ruder&Finn/James Harff account of recent Balkan history must have ultimately suited the purposes of the administration's view of U.S. geopolitical interests—what Garry Wills has recently called “security imperialism”—for it to have had such a long run in American consciousness.²¹ But for that, the story surely would have been replaced by another official version. Nonetheless, its power and longevity remain impressive, especially given the fact that countervailing evidence is more widely available. It is an old adage that first impressions tend to stick. But how do we account their stickiness? How should we understand individuals like Vulliamy who tend to resist alternative interpretations even when false claims are refuted? He does sound as though he continues to believe what he says. Could he still be unconsciously trapped by a manipulated discourse?

And how should we understand the quiet complicity of the press in keeping a sensational story going? For example, while NATO was still bombing Yugoslavia, Balkan watchers noted a rumor that the Serbs had massacred hundreds, if not thousands, of Albanians at the site of the Trepča mine. Allegations flew that the Serbs used the mine as a crematorium to dispose of the remains of the dead to conceal the scope of their war crimes and genocide. This story assumed a life of its own and was used to dramatize the “demonic” nature of the Serbs. When forensics experts investigated the mine, however, they found no bodies or remains whatsoever—not even an animal bone.

¹⁹ All quotations from the Harff interview come from Merlino, 125–29.

²⁰ Bogdanich and Lettmayer.

²¹ Garry Wills, “Bully of the Free World,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 52.

These findings, in contrast to the rumor, were not big news. They appeared in a small insert on p. A3 of the *New York Times* on 13 October 1999 (Figure 3 opposite). The article concluded with the statement that 150 sites had been examined and hundreds more suspected sites were to be examined. It did not make the more important point, however, that the bodies unearthed were hundreds to thousands fewer than predicted (Figure 4 on p. 156).²²

Can psychoanalysis shed any light on what makes the more sensational atrocity story linger past the point of its credibility? Can it explain the slowness of people to react once they are made aware that they have been sold a Bill of Goods? Perhaps a bit, but only a bit. Too many factors, too many discourses, too much of what Foucault calls the “local cynicism of power,” converge for any psychoanalytic theory to provide exhaustive insight.²³ We might usefully invoke old concepts, such as identification with the victim or with the aggressor, or the satisfaction of a desire for disavowed and projected masochism or sadism. However, these notions provide only necessary but insufficient conditions. The effect of propaganda on the unconscious signifiers of the social body is equally significant.

Although the role of print journalism remains central, the written word is increasingly supplanted by TV and Internet images, to which the unconscious human psyche is particularly vulnerable. Alić teaches us that a picture is worth thousands and thousands of words. The video screen, with its intimate glimpse of the face of grief, mutilation, and death, creates the illusion of an unobserved gaze, a gaze which seems utterly private, as though no one is there to watch the watching. The viewer needn't take responsibility for his voyeurism. The scene, primal or otherwise, comes to him; he doesn't go looking for it. In its remoteness, the body poses no evident threat. He can indulge both fascination and disgust at the sight of the body castrated. He can momentarily and vainly believe that it's possible to stand at the periphery of Being and gaze into that abyss where all points converge into mystery, that he can look into the eyes of God without going grey. But, as the noted French

²² Subsequent press articles eventually did emphasize the absence of bodies more strongly. See, for example, an article by Daniel Pearl and Robert Block which appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 1999, under the header “Body Count.”

²³ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 187.

Figure 3. *New York Times*, 13 October 1999, p. A3

Figure 4. *New York Times*, 13 October 1999, p. A3

psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan reminded us, a picture is simply “a trap for the gaze.”²⁴

In other words, the viewer can deny what Lacan took to be essential to the gaze, namely that it is structured both by the seen and the third who sees the seeing of the seeing. The viewer’s ignorance of the fact that he, as viewer, is being carefully observed, makes him an unwitting participant in a power relation by which he is finally subjugated. The viewer is carefully monitored by ratings and polls, targeted by marketing strategies, and manipulated by what passes for information. The situation of the contemporary TV audience calls to mind Foucault’s description of the imaginary architectural apparatus contrived by Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in *Panopticon* (1791). This device was designed to achieve an orderly, controlled society through the use of surveillance by means of the gaze of a central observation tower. Because of its structure, inhabitants, living separated from one another, would never know for sure whether they were being looked at or not. They would know only that they could be at any time. Even the observers would be regulated by the process through which they observed. The gaze of the Other and the Other of the Other would be inescapable. Foucault quotes Bentham on the potential benefits of the structure: “*Morals reformed—health preserved—industry invigorated—instruction diffused—public burthens lightened—Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock....*” According to Bentham, this arrangement would avoid tyranny through democracy, since it would have access “to the great tribunal committee of the world.”²⁵ Foucault takes care to remind us not to take this model too concretely. Bentham’s optical system, designed to exercise power through the gaze, is finally a political schema, “a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men.”²⁶ It guarantees that the entire social body participate in its own subjugation.

The human gaze is immensely powerful. Lacan knew this, Bentham and Foucault knew this, and so did Penny Marshall and her crew. As a result, Fikret Alić has caught our eye, and ultimately, we caught his. He will forever stand outside the barbed wire and stare as we are held captive.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 89.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 207.

²⁶ Foucault, 205.

Freud understood this too. In his writings on the war neuroses, he emphasized that one need not be at the front to fall ill from war.²⁷ Since all neurosis is ultimately a “disorder of the unconscious imagination,”²⁸ the conflict created by a look from a distance into the face of human suffering is all that is required to make the onlooker sick. A war neurosis can be understood as a hermeneutic success in that it makes a genuine interpretive connection to war’s victims. Neurosis is a uniquely human disorder, one that is generated by a tension between that which traps us and that which sets us free. It rests upon an awareness of the fact of the trap, even though its actual boundaries and structure remain a mystery. The potential for neurotic suffering requires an inner knowledge of a capture by the symbols and signifiers of a personal and a communal past. What is “beyond horror” is the sacrifice of this knowledge and the struggle for it to an illusion of freedom and certainty.²⁹ One can imagine that the citizens of Bentham’s project might relinquished their capacity for neurotic illness. They might have adapted to being so observed and controlled in the national interest, enjoying rock-like economic security like Western countries have today. They, like Madeleine Albright, might say that the price was worth it. But they would have, in turn, sacrificed their very humanity.

The Serbs will eventually capture our gaze as well. Though they have as a people suffered enormously, they maintain the advantage of a measure of clear sight. They have seen the seeing; and as witnesses to their recent history they maintain a locus for the truth. Once the storm of sensationalism that surrounds them passes and the cloud-covering lifts, our eyes will meet theirs. We might see the look of the atrocity that the Western nations have committed. Should that happen, should we properly understand how the Serbs have acted and why, there stands a chance that the humanity of *this* nation might be restored. We may, however, become ill in the process.

²⁷ See Sigmund Freud, “Introduction to Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).

²⁸ See Ernest Jones, “War Shock and Freud’s Theory of the Neuroses,” in Sandor Ferenczi et al., *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses* (London: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1921), 55.

²⁹ A contemporary representation of the “beyond horror” of not knowing that one is trapped by the gaze of the Other is Peter Weir’s movie *The Truman Show*, in which Jim Carrey, in the role of Truman Burbank, is unaware that his entire life is actually a TV program being observed by viewers everywhere. His knowledge of this dawns as an emerging shocking truth.