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TWIN TOWERS: TERRIBLE MACHINE

OR

THE REALITY QUESTIONED

Hasan Bülent Kahraman

Just after September 11, one of the leading journals in Turkey asked me to write what I think about the events. As I was completing the article the editor of an important daily newspaper¹ asked me if I could go to New York and report my observations for his newspaper. I accepted without hesitation. Similar to what has been done by hundreds of intellectuals all over the globe I finished and delivered my article to the journal not having seen anything more than the images appearing on the television screen (Kahraman, 2001).

I arrived in New York ten days after the event. The zone was completely closed to the public. Thousands of people, all over the city were searching the missing bodies. Ceremonies and commemorations were being held all over the city, Union Square being the eminent spot. Mostly they were religious gatherings. Various religions were participating the events with their peculiar rituals. All buildings in the district were covered with asbestos. The scenes appeared worse than an after-war landscape. New Yorkers were in a deep sorrow and uncertainty. Everybody was afraid of taking the subway and even stayed in their homes. National anthem was being played aloud in all subway stops and in most public spaces. Banners and flags were everywhere. The whole town was covered with pleading posters and the pictures of the missing. Magazines and newspapers with headlines such as "a nation attacked" provoked the feeling of horror and violence further.

At a very early hour in the morning, I was in the zone. As it had been announced that only one section would be opened for public access. Obtaining the necessary permission to enter after long wait and difficult confrontations with the police forces I was able to enter in. It was completely impossible to recognize the area with which I was quite familiar for years. Everywhere was like a sort of very colorful site. Thousands of people were working with enormous sized huge construction machines. The building was burning inside. The heavy and continuous rain showers of the last days were

not enough to cool down the melted metal mountain.

From another viewpoint, New York was such an interesting place to be in. The whole town was mourning. The whole nation was fixed to the TV screen. I run into a most interesting thing in this context at a bar: a man was taking pictures of the images seen on the TV screen. When I asked him why he was doing that he said, "the images will soon disappear for ever, eventually I want to have, keep and look at them for ever."

I visited the same place three months later. In this second trip, I would stay in New York for three weeks and my friend was accompanying me.

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We stayed at the apartment of one of my ex-students. It was in Brooklyn Heights and the area is located just across the Manhattan Island. One could easily capture the very well known silhouette of Manhattan skyscrapers through the riverbank in this district, which I have known for years and loved very much. The Twin Towers were not located on the shore. It is inside and in those days, it could only be seen behind the buildings. Hence, it was impossible to observe the debris from the shore.

I was very well aware of this but even before we departed, my friend told me that she wanted to see the site. T. Nariç, my friend, was quite familiar with New York but had never lived in Brooklyn Heights and was assuming that she could see what was left after the fall. Though I explained the situation, despite the severe and unexpected cold the very first morning we arrived there, she wanted to go to the shore. We walked along the promenade and tried to guess its place. In city, everywhere was still covered with the photographs, posters, and reminders.

In the mornings, we were taking long walks in the promenade and each and every time Nariç was once more exclaiming her wish to see the building. However, I was reluctant to go there once again. I had told this to her and naturally she could go any time she wanted. Soon I realized that everyday we were looking to the other shore from the very same point and we were talking on the same matter. However, without any allusion I decided to follow up what was happening to her and where she would end. Up with this I had perceived Nariç's reaction and I was comparing it to another significant fact.

We were coming to the end of our stay and she was consciously or unconsciously refraining from going there despite her continuous remarks that she wanted to.

Finally, just the day before our departure she decided to go and see it. She was insisting that I should go with her. We decided to go there after having breakfast in a café, which has been a sort of temple for both of us over the years. The reason I wanted to go with her was to observe her reactions.

During the breakfast, I observed that she was unnaturally slow and she was taking her time. After I reminded her, we left and started to walk. She was very uneasy. When we reached, I saw that everything was "formatted." Americans had put everything in order and transformed the situation into a system as usual. The building was now reached through an aisle and over a platform. People were writing their names, feelings, thoughts and the identities of their missing bodies on the plywood walls. Nariç did the same things. She acted as if she entered a sacred place. She was observing everything as one does in an ancient temple or ruin. She told me that she was spellbound and in contracting feelings. She was well aware that she was standing in front of a disaster area, even a calamity but she could not prevent herself to act as she was confronting a monument. The first thing shocked her was the enormous size of the space. "Enthralling" she was saying, "scary," "unbelievable." However, at one point she said "beautiful." She was looking for distinction points she had known before. Finally she said it is now a merged space-the merging of inside and outside.

That night we went to River Café very close to our place where one could get the most classical and conventional view of TT. Instead of the towers, there were only two light beams. Though everything was magical, Nariç merely looked at them bewitched.

Later on, retrospectively, I thought on this matter. I was quite familiar to Nariç's reactions because the same feelings were experienced by two prominent personalities precisely a century ago. They were Freud and Le Corbusier and the object was Parthenon of Athens. Nariç was once again verifying what Corbusier called as ineffable, unspeakable structures after having similar feelings. Now I will, beginning with that concept, argue that TT as a visual reality emphasizes four distinctive facts. The first of these is the concept of the visuality of the invisible, second the horror vacui, the

horror of vacuum/emptiness, third the idea of uncanny and the fourth the postmodern transformation of the concept of tragic and the meaning of the evil in the late modern period.

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It is evident from his journals and diaries that Le Corbusier visited the Parthenon twice the first one in 1911 the later in 1933 (Vidler 54-55).² Even in the first trip he falls into bewilderment before the building. However, his enchantment with the structure had started ages before his visit and the reason for it being there was to see. Nevertheless, he cannot climb there as soon as he arrives into the city. He postpones his encounter with "countless pretexts" but finally has to face it. It is a strange meeting because the building in its present condition has now been loaded with completely new and different meanings. In its decomposed form it has performed an extremely important function and realized what Corbusier calls "the fourth dimension". This is the transformation of the inner space into exterior. Finally the building has reached a point of pure and absolute transparency and has unified with its outside. Yet there is more because the structure has also created a sheer feeling of horror over Le Corbusier. He expresses his feelings as follows: "a pressure of extra-human fatigue grabs you" (Corbusier 154). After having reinforced his description with such adjectives as "violence, terror, sacrifice" he ends up saying, "*Le Parthenon, terrible machine*" (Corbusier 154).

Before going further into what Corbusier's approach means let us acknowledge that Freud has experienced a very similar feeling. We can follow from his personal impression that he also has been drifted away before the building by the likewise sentiments. Freud also creates numerous pretexts to delay his visit (Freud; 1995: 239-250).³ His trip to Athens is another but personal matter of discomfort for Freud because he is in a sense a feel of guilt for his father has not been able to come to Athens. Nevertheless, finally, in the summer of 1903 Freud arrives in Athens but defers his encounter with Acropolis until very late afternoon. He even changes clothes and puts on a clean shirt for the occasion (Vidler 57).⁴ He epitomizes his mood before the building with a concept then a key for him, "oceanic."⁵

Both men run into feelings that they would explain as unbelievable,

unreal. For Corbusier, "to see Parthenon is a dream that one caresses without even dreaming of realizing it" (Corbusier 158). Whereas for Freud to encounter it is to run into a "feeling of the unbelievable and the unreal" (Freud "A Disturbance," 241-243). In this context Freud characterizes the building and the surrounding landscape as "an object of doubt" (Freud "A Disturbance," 241) ending up with the idea of "derealization" (*Entfremdungsgefühl*) (Freud "A Disturbance," 244).

The proclamation of these ideas by Le Corbusier was natural. After all as has been noted by Vidler, he was taking the Parthenon out of the category of the beautiful and was embodying it in the category of *terrifying sublime* (Vidler 55). Vidler accounts this as a Nietzschean approach (Vidler 55). This is obvious in Corbusier's case for he himself was defining his feelings as *virtually religious* (Corbusier 7-8).⁶ At this point, another relation between the TT and the Parthenon could be built. Although Corbusier acclaiming and emphasizing the vacuum the building encompassed in the final analysis there was a building. In the case of the TT it was not anymore a building articulating and hinging the interior and the exterior but it was a *complete vacuum*. In this context it could be argued that it was once again the accentuation of a return the Nietzschean thought surpassing the Kantian understanding.

This is the final extent of the world we live in. At this point as a visual process one could easily support the idea that TT has reached the position of terrifying sublime and that, we are passing through a Nietzschean post-aesthetics period and in this regard, we can start analyzing the causes and the constitutive elements of such a development.

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America is an extension of the medieval age in the minds and subconscious of the people who has never lived through it as a country. In this present day, medieval age American people are called road warriors. In this country before people get out of their homes, they make and equip themselves with their clothing as medieval age chevalier armors himself. In this America the cities are enclosed within the walls as the cities of the

medieval age. The present day walls do not anymore pertain to the conventional forms. They have been transformed. The skyscrapers of the Manhattan Island, their castle like silhouettes enshrine the people with a feeling of security as the walls. Now there is a huge hole in this protective wall. The citadel has a gap and this vacancy points and gears toward a big trouble. What we find in our hands in the aftermath of 9/11 is this *horror vacui*.

Vacuum horror is very well known since Pascal (Vidler 17-24).⁷ In a long period of his life Pascal has suffered from a feeling of abyss on his left side thinking that he would fall and get lost. He has expressed many times the discomfort, unease, fear and anxiety caused by this feeling. Pascal's vacuum or better Pascal's abyss has always been an interest of the world of psychiatry up until Freud has thought over this issue. The last one tackling the problem was Charchot. Freud's one of early but clear and concrete criticisms directed to this famous doctor of the time and one, which has brought the first distinctive break of Freud from the conventional model, is around this very concept of Pascal abyss and the former's analysis concerning it (Freud "Obsessions and Phobias" 73-78).

This idea has paved way in the late 19th and early 20th century to the notion of agoraphobia and many other related concepts derived as a reaction to the new urban developments of the early modernity. Although at the beginning the crowded and "warped space" was the source of this fear later in time vacancy has become the origin of the many different discomfort felt in the cities. America now is facing this shock and trying to get over it. However as the vacuum stands there it is impossible to defeat it and Americans will never feel in security and they will have to live with the cavity of TT as Pascal has been attached to his abyss. They will always believe and assume that that space will capture and gulp them away, always having this anxiety and tension.

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There is an interesting question here. The TT for the most part was not a place of attraction for the New Yorkers. They were well aware that it was there, as Freud knew the existence of the Acropolis. However, it had never

been a place terribly internalized by New Yorkers. People would dine in the cafes, restaurants and would take a view of the environs from the terrace on top but these were always more relevant for the tourists. To be there and to experience the TT was something like pilgrimage. It had already had a religious meaning in this sense yet its sacred meaning was not only limited to this. To be inside or on top of TT meant to reach the ever-highest point any human being could get, to sanctify the scientificism and everything donated by god and to be in touch with the idea of monumentality humans carry in their subconscious. The notion of perpendicularity and all other related references concerning the notion of monumentality would be experienced by a visit to the building. Any relation with the building in this sense would mean worshipping.

These were true for the man-in-the-street. Americans would also go and visit the building as tourists. They would partake in the organized tours getting information about the building. The essence of the information was comparing the building with other great buildings-not only the ones left in the historical background but also the other large battements created in the other parts of the world would be involved in this comparative reading. This framework would perhaps added the people living in a country with relatively short history a historical depth. It probably helped the people to locate themselves somewhere in the historical cartography. Those references to Egyptian Pyramids and Babel Tower would help render people in a notion of transcendentalism spreading over the ages. In the same line with this, there would be a continuous emphasis on the enormity of the building's size, which would in return enhance the self-confidence.⁸ However, in the end the building was for the most part invisible for the man-in-the-street. The TT was something that he used to look but not see any more, it was simply a reality there that he did not perceive any more. The fall of the building, made it more visible. Today the TT is seen through its invisibility. This is what I call the *visibility of the invisible* and vice versa and attached to this is the notion of uncanny conceptualized by Freud in his article bearing the same name.

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After long elaborations on the lexicographic and etymological meaning

of the word, in his analysis Freud, finally, argues that the uncanny (*unheimlich*) both in German and in all other Western languages have the same meaning with its antinomy, namely canny —*heimlich* (Freud "The Uncanny," 219-256).⁹ After showing that the two words transform into each other and are used interchangeably with a number of references to various different sources starts to rethink about the reasons for such a strange condition. To put it in a nutshell, Freud relates the situation to the residues of the animistic understanding of the world in our subconscious. He ends up arguing that what we call canny is something which has once been extremely close to us and the prefix "un" represents a repression (Freud "The Uncanny," 241, 245).

Despite all there is one more important point stressed by Freud. He delves into the relation between the uncanny and imagination. In this context, the uncanny stands for both the relation to perceiving of the impossible. What is uncanny comes into being when what has been once unimaginable, unthinkable, unrealizable happens and when the distance and the relation of impossibility disappear. Accordingly, he argues that, "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (Freud "The Uncanny," 244). In another attempt, he demarcates the relation between the symbolic and the uncanny: "when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes" (Freud "The Uncanny," 244). More explicitly, when a symbol becomes the reality itself there is the uncanny.

From this viewpoint, the fall of the TT is undoubtedly the birth of the uncanny infusing into the life. However, this exhuming of the uncanny in this context has further openings. First of all with this eventuality what has been once unthinkable, unexpected has been realized and has become the reality itself. From now on to imagine something unimaginable itself is almost impossible. This finally is the victory of the imagination as I have elaborated on in another article. There were people, artists, writers, novelists, and film directors imagining the fall of the TT. What they were doing was to push the(ir) imagination to its final limits. The fall of the TT with a plane attack was the finality of the imagination.¹⁰ The 9/11 not only realizes this and brings a new remark on the imagination of the unimaginable but also verifies the concept of the uncanny as well.

This is the concretization of the uncanny in its Freudian sense. In this context the old views and mythologies on the uncanniness of the artist and their imagination is proved at another level. Second, with this, the defeat of the capitalism both literally and brutally a new notion of reality is born. I call that "immediate or undistanced reality." Third, a more interesting point, if the uncanny is the realization of the unthinkable in that context the building of the TT was itself a sort of uncanny event with its entire enormity. Hence, it was itself something uncanny people lived with. It gave them an unexpressed fear that it would lead to further and other uncanny events. Its fall reminds us the concept of *involuntary repetition* Freud develops in his article mentioned (Freud "The Uncanny," 237). Since the very first day people thought that an evil eye would affect the TT and finally it happened. This is a condition not only causing the immense fear, because Freud clearly verifies that repetition the realization of the expected itself is thought to be uncanny, and relates people once again to the notion of the evil.

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Now we can analyze the two last concepts, the tragic and the evil starting by the former. Do all people looking at the wreck of the TT get absorbed by the feeling of tragic? Though it is not easy to answer this question by saying no, the notion of tragic should be revisited.

From the feeling of tragic emanates the individual. This is true and unchanged since Oedipus. Prometheus turns this into an open struggle with the demiurge to gain his personality. Sisyphus symbolizes the resistance of the human being though he is well aware of the fact that there is no and will never be the top of the hill. Electra, Medea and Antigone stand for the tragic as an inner matter. However, in the postmodern era it seems that tragic has lost its very peculiarity. It is now a methodology and tool of creating a communal spirit.

The last but most striking benchmark in this process was AIDS. It was doubtlessly a phenomenon with such deep social aspects. However, the way it has been perceived shows that it has layers surpassing this condition. It was the symbol of suffering the communal pain. Yet suffering has further meaning in the present day world: the feeling of guilt. AIDS forces us to live our lives

within a bulky feeling of open or tacit guilt. In this respect, AIDS as the most significant metaphor of the postmodern age leads us to internalize a completely new communal culture. Suffering is not any more private, introverted and individual but, to put it with Levinas' concept "inter-human" (Levinas 158). On the other hand, this is a critical, interesting and self-contradictory condition in an age of egoism, a consequence of neo-liberal policies, and fragmentation.

TT is the last phase of this happening. The view, the picture we get from it distinctly reflects the tragic of a post-war period. Human beings suffer around it as a community and express this emphasizing their pains. It might be considered natural in a culture keeping the penance in its subconscious. An example to prove how this is the *zeitgeist* of our age: in the following days of the great earthquake in Turkey somebody has argued that this should have been taken as the penance for our sinful behavior and lives. Nevertheless TT has more when evil is considered because it has now completely ended and changed the notion as developed by Aquinas, Sade, Bataille and Genet. This is the end of the aesthetization of the evil and marks the transition from the tragic evil to popular evil.

What is the end of such a world? Evidently, *that spectacular* reminds us the movies *Peeping Tom* and *15 Minutes*, which is a bad copy of the former. The aim of those films was to merge life with image. It was merely a search and a question asking what would happen afterwards. On the other hand, that merging itself was an image and an illusionary process, a fiction. The live images of the TT tragedy denote the point that has been reached and beyond the size problem, it is not that new. Images have been reflecting us the kidnappings, suicides, the most private of the sexuality and these were not fiction. The TT images dwelled on top of these assure us that the "reality" of the image will not be searched any more. From now on image is something necessarily accepted and believed without any further questioning. Beginning by now the questionable is not the image but the reality itself. Nothing but this is tragedy.

Notes

¹ This newspaper was Milliyet and the editor was Mehmet Y. Yılmaz. I wrote to Milliyet my observations and impressions. Here I take this opportunity to thank once again Mehmet Yılmaz for his kind and generous support and consideration.

² These visits are elaborated in Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, 54-56. However the source of Corbusier's original analysis regarding his first trip is *Le Corbusier, Le Voyage d'Orient*. Paris: Les Editions Forces Vives, 1966, 173. The English translation is *Le Corbusier, Journey to the East*. Eds. I. Zaknic and N. Pertuiset. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987. In this article, I will refer to the French edition. The remarks of the second visit are found in *Le Corbusier, New World of Space*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1948, 66.

³ This is "confessed" in his letter to Romain Rolland. Sigmund Freud. "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis: An Open Letter to Romain Rolland on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday." *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. V. XXII. Trans. from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud assisted by A. Strachey and A. Tyson. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1995, 239-250.

⁴ Vidler emphasizes this point, however in the original text I have not encountered anything such as. See Anthony Vidler, *The Warped Space*, 57.

⁵ The concept of "ocenaic" is not the first time used in this text.

⁶ Le Corbusier, *New World of Space*, 7-8. Accounted in Vidler, 54-55.

⁷ A critical discussion of Pascal's anxiety is found in Anthony Vidler, *The Warped Spaces*, 17-24.

⁸ I owe this point to the invaluable remark of Dr. Müge Göcek.

⁹ Sigmund Freud. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. V. III. Trans. from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna

Freud assisted by A. Strachey and A. Tyson, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1995, 219-256. As has been noted in the English translation of the article the word "unheimlich" which is the original word Freud uses literally means "unhomely" and in this sense, (sic.) "the English term is not, of course, an equivalent of the German one" (219).

¹⁰ However, there is a self-denying concept here for, once something is imagined it is a matter of time and probability to happen not a matter of impossibility.

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