



Mustafa Ziyalan

Uses of human blood

Are the US going back to the McCarthy era and is the invasion of Iraq the beginning of a dark age? Mustafa Ziyalan examines American culture: the films and toys supporting the American military and army against the multicultural example of New York on the other end of the spectrum. Ziyalan speaks out for the freedom of speech and languages.

On February 15 I was out in the city with my son, a third grader. We participated in the anti-war demonstration in New York. There were a couple of other families we knew. The children prepared signs in a pizzeria where we met in Brooklyn; in the demonstration they sang and yelled the songs and slogans they made up, jumped up and down, danced with infectious enthusiasm:

One, two, three, four
We don't want your stinky war!
Five, six, seven, eight,
War is stupid, peace is great!

There were hundreds of thousands of people from very different walks of life. It was fun, entertaining, and lovely. Still, I remembered what Berger wrote about the limits of legal demonstrations and I almost forgot democracy did not yet exist.

In the streets of New York I saw a conceptual art work: *One Blood* by Claire Lemmel and David Jones. It consisted of four canvases painted with the blood donated by countless people for this project. It reminded me of works by Nitch and Quinn and seemed to strive to go beyond a simplistic humanism by utilizing – or "using", if you like – human blood this way. I felt it was urging me to consider our similarities next to our differences, to join a collective platform of consciousness and action, and exactly through the concept along which we have been segregated thousandfold: blood, our blood, no less.

Then I went to an anti-war demonstration with my six-year-old daughter. There were around 250.000 people. "Oil is not worth a single drop of blood", the demonstrators said. Aggression, exploitation, greed were called shameful. Someone's sign said: "I used to be comfortable being an American / Now I tell them I'm Canadian". "Empty warhead found in White House!" Impeachment of President Bush was demanded. Some shopkeepers went out on the sidewalk and yelled "Allah is great!" in Arabic.

Then the invasion of Iraq started. The next morning I thought the city did not feel like a city at war. I was not expecting anything extraordinary; yet it

bothered me that everything would be this ordinary. The First Gulf War was presented like a video game; this war's presentation – and for some, if not many, the experience – was characterized by a sense of distance. Those cameras seemingly stuck on the same frame, waiting for the explosions, and the prevailing absence of any debate reinforced this feeling. Gradually I came to feel this war was being presented as a reality TV show. All that footage, seemingly presented live by the "embedded" journalists, seemingly reducing any distance to the events, was in fact shot and heavily edited some time in advance, and was effectively, almost insurmountably escalating this sense of distance. Ultimately, this distance was similar – if not parallel to, or worse yet, synergistic with – the distance between the victim and the killer, this time around doing his bloody deed with "smart bombs." Perhaps it could also be argued – like Jordan Crandall did – that the weapons – camera mounted soldiers, "smart" missiles, etc. – were turning into cameras, and visa versa, the cameras were turning effectively into weapons. Soldiers and cameras, the eye and the weapon were collapsing into one and the same. Watching foreign TV channels was driving this point more painfully home.

I thought, one rare force taking on this rather cold, solid absence of debate and alternative contexts, reducing, occasionally filling up the distance between us and the events was the anti-war demonstrations. The media here eventually could not ignore them. A co-worker said this war was bothering him more than September 11. Another said he felt like he was being forced at gunpoint to beat up some stranger. A friend said, "We may be seeing the decline of Rome. And we are Rome."

Meanwhile, the invasion continues. How did we – starting with the impression that the war could be stopped – end up here?

I'm not for underestimating the individual. Still, I don't think not looking further than the individuals will help to understand how any war starts and continues. Yet, in a pinch, we can mention that President Bush is an evangelical Christian, that his Christianity is decidedly different, more unforgiving than, say, former President Carter's, that he is selected – by the Supreme Court – rather than elected – by the electorate. We can say that he seems to lack empathy and there are some – like Mark Crispin Miller from NYU – who argue that he is a genuine psychopath.

Better yet, we can turn to concepts like imperialism. We can contemplate the bankruptcy of arguments that the imperialism of our time is a smiling one, which does not need brute force very much and goes about its business primarily – if not exclusively – by ideological means, in the process retreating almost entirely to an ideological realm. We can try to redefine the concept – as suggested by Kafkazli Seyed Javad from Bristol University – or try to unearth its seemingly long-lost meanings. It is clear that such big concepts are not needed to feel a repulsion against this war, however; the plain unjustness of going after a weakling who did not and could not harm you directly is apparently enough to draw many to the streets, at least initially. Otherwise, it would be harder to understand these global, colorful anti-war demonstrations.

We can take a look at some products of the popular culture, at movies like *Three Kings* or more interestingly at *Black Hawk Down*, which came so close to scaring me. There, in an all too familiar scenario, white American soldiers try to survive relentless attacks by black Somalians in a land they don't know and can't understand. The blacks are referred to as "skinnies". This is not a horror movie, yet it reminded me of *Night of the Living Dead*, the classic

zombie movie. This similarity was one of the reasons why the creators of *Black Hawk Down* could conveniently skirt the question "What are the Americans doing here?" The visual – even metaphorical – vocabulary these two movies – for their own different reasons – were drawing on may very well suggest a way of looking at recent events in Iraq, even the whole world: At the center white countries trying to hold the gates of their castles, in the periphery hungry crowds with dark skin trying to penetrate those castles at every cost. In fact, according to President Bush, the barbarians envy the wealth and democracy inside. The solution recommended by some, including Bush and Co. here is similar to the one the sheriff recommended against the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*: "You should shoot them in the head!"

More important things: The sweet give-and-take between the toy industry and military in USA. The army has already released its own free downloadable computer game; children grow up on video games with controllers very similar to the controls of weaponry and get desensitized to things associated with military, weapons and war. We read – in the *Notebook* by Lewis H. Lapham – "national opinion polls report 46 percent of the respondents registering themselves – together with President George W. Bush – as evangelical Christians", "48 percent denying as heresy the theory of evolution, another 68 percent knowing that it has met or seen the Devil." Multiculturalism in its encouraged, popular form is about distance and tolerance (putting up with) but not necessarily knowledge of, familiarity with and love for "the other"; in this form it rather serves as a tool for dividing, conquering and ruling.

Perhaps most importantly, as Michael Moore points out in *Bowling for Columbine*, all manner of real or perceived anxieties, fears and suspicions reign supreme in this country. Real concerns: Unemployment is as high as 15 percent in some areas; 40 percent of the population does not have health insurance of any kind; retirement savings invested in the stock market, conjuring the illusion of having a stake in the system, were wiped out by the stagnated economy – in recession to some, in outright collapse to others – and plain corruption, forcing many to drastically change or to altogether give up their retirement plans. Public schools are starving. These are issues, which require penetrating changes. Now, as if to overshadow all these real anxieties, fears and suspicions, outright fictitious ones are being spun. Eventually, people end up believing that immigrants cause loss of resources and employment; suicide attacks like the one on September 11 and terrorism can be fought with the Star Wars System, there is a direct link between Iraq and September 11, preemptive strikes against an endless list of countries will bring about a safer world, war can improve economy, for them, too. All these real or borderline delusional thoughts and feelings, coupled with the fact that the troops – the loved ones – are already at the front line translate into approval ratings up to 70 percent for this invasion.

One factor, which makes this easier, is increasing monopolization in publishing and broadcasting, which further limits debate and freedom of speech. Bill Maher essentially said that the terrorists of September 11 stayed in the planes and should not be considered more cowardly than soldiers hitting their adversary with remote controlled weaponry; corporate sponsors pulled their ads from his show and he lost his job. A member of the music group Dixie Chicks said she was ashamed to be from the same state as the president; their music was banned on many stations owned by the same corporation (ClearChannel). There are efforts to make the dissenting actors and actresses (Sarandon, Robbins, Sheen, Garofalo...) make suffer consequences. Even more concrete rights are being rattled; many people were summarily "disappeared",

allegedly held as material witnesses, who are defined as "persons who may have information pertaining to a criminal investigation for the purpose of testifying before a grand jury or during a criminal proceeding." (You can visit www.freemikehawash.org for a typical case.) Following September 11 the Patriot Act was passed in a rush, obscured by the feelings over the attack; it gave sweeping new powers, mostly regarding surveillance, to both domestic law enforcement and international intelligence agencies.

Beyond and above all this, there is an effort to reshape the language in ways which would make the rulers of Orwell's *1984* proud: Iraq is "rescued", "liberated" by "Operation Iraqi Freedom", the bombs are "smart", there is unfortunately "friendly fire", Iraqi deaths are "collateral damage" and Iraqi body count is not taken, because "freedom has a price", and "war is untidy."

Perhaps I should mention the joke about the kidnapping of President Bush here; it really became the talk of the Internet:

A guy stops at the red light on some street corner and hears somebody knocking on his window. He rolls it down and looks up to see this man standing by, who says: "Sir, President Bush has been kidnapped; they are asking for a ransom of 50 billion bucks to set him free, or else they will pour gasoline on him and set him on fire. So we are asking around for donations." The driver asks, "OK, just tell me how much everybody else is chipping in on the average!" "Well, whatever their conscience tells them to, you know, may be a gallon or two..."

The punchline is built – almost as a requirement for black humor – along the possibility of destruction; humor, like in most places where it flourishes, is used as the slingshot of David. Then, to the question whether or not irony is dead: Well, on one hand, if it were dead, it is resurrected, it seems, not long afterward; on the other hand, our times do not need irony to be resurrected at all. A level of conflictedness, which can cause chuckles or even mad laughter, has become part and parcel of our everyday life lately. As mentioned, Iraq is invaded to rescue, to liberate it. Iraq is brought down on its citizens' heads in order to be rebuilt. The invasion is still looking for its original justification, weapons of mass destruction. The more the land and its oil, museums and other resources are privatized, looted, pillaged, plundered and put on the auction block, the more they are reclaimed by Iraqis. Imperialists using smart bombs catapult even the imperialism back to its centuries-old, primitive, aggressive, marauding, original self; they expose it in its most unadulterated, naked, archetypal form. USA is trying to overcome victimhood inflicted upon him by September 11 by victimizing. The Patriot Act, which diminishes freedom, privacy and ultimately democracy is passed to protect the freedom and the democracy; the masses of the country, whose democracy, freedom and wealth is allegedly being protected are emerging from all this poorer; meanwhile the country is going back to the McCarthy era.

Not every American soldier fighting in Iraq is an American citizen. Third world citizens in the American Army are fighting and killing other third world citizens in order to become American citizens; the moment they die they attain the American citizenship they longed for their whole lives. Not long ago the Guatemalan National anthem was played in the burial ceremony of an American soldier. A private who was taken prisoner and later rescued is from a town with very high rates of unemployment; she wanted to become a teacher and joined the army because she could not afford the required education. Now

this war will in all likelihood increase the unemployment in her town, decrease funding for education and overall make it harder for children to become teachers. War for safety will not make anybody safer. If this is our life now, it is safe to say that irony and black humor can hardly be appreciated separately, on their own terms.

Well, where will all this lead? Guerilla warfare or civil war may take hold in a "democratic" Iraq, which is privatized and developed, for the consumption of corporations. Smaller countries may scramble to develop nuclear weapons to avoid Iraq's fate. More people may feel that might is right, democracy is only an eight-letter-word, feed-back even in the form of demonstrations does not have a point, everybody is bound to fend for himself or herself, whoever's lower in the food chain will eventually be eaten, you can deal with some alleged terrorist in any way you please. If the invasion of Iraq is indeed the beginning of a dark age – as predicted in theory – the foremost reason and outcome of this age will be imposed and false legitimacy for these and similar evil banalities or banal evils.

Then, in the times ahead it will be very important to create viable alternatives to these ways of thinking. The anti-war movement can revolve into an anti-invasion, anti-military-spending movement, ultimately into a movement for democracy, namely to enable everybody to create and realize their own alternatives. Tendencies against a generic power can turn into movements against corporations, emperors, empires and the concept of empire altogether, namely into anti-imperialist movements.

Meanwhile, one of the most relevant struggles will be against the usurpation and use of language as a weapon by the empire and emperors. Erich Fried was right; simpler poems do not mean a simpler life at all. We should reclaim not only our freedom, the right to use our own blood, but also our language, our words, as John Berger said. If one weapon against Goliath is its own aging, conflicted body, another weapon could well be this struggle; and anything from the macabre to cheerful humor, poetry, prose, audio and visual art, in short any kind of language, any kind of expression will be involved in it.

At any rate, contemplating New York gives me hope. September 11 targeted this city. It has the highest unemployment rate. Yet, the area most opposed to this war is New York. I think, one important reason for this is that people from very different backgrounds are living together here, not simply next to each other, but really together. This gives them the chance to develop a common language, to get to know each other, even to love each other, to transcend fear and paranoia, to dispel delusions. It is said that G. W. Bush hates New York. He might as well. For me, it is just the opposite: I feel more drawn to New York in these times. In a way, New York indeed is not at war.

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