



## E. Efe Çakmak On "Snow White"

*Suicide attacks in Istanbul and the need for poetry*

E. Efe Çakmak challenges our views on suicide-bombings – rather than submitting to the temptation of regarding suicide bombers as "personifications of the absolute evil" we should view them as our likes. According to Çakmak, works of art and poetry can serve to fulfil this function: one example is the installation by Dror and Gunilla Sköld Feiler *Snow White and The Madness of Truth* which shot to fame after it was being attacked by the Israeli consul-general to Sweden, Svi Mazel. Read "why the insertion of poetry into this complex reality is different from other methods of rationalising and establishing cognitive links".

The recent, government-supported, anti-genocide symposium held in Sweden incorporated an exhibition titled *Making a Difference*, where an installation by Dror Feiler and his wife Gunilla Sköld Feiler, named *Snow White and The Madness of Truth* was unveiled. It is through this exhibition that we realised that Israel boasts some of the world's finest bureaucrats and politicians having nothing better to do than criticise the implications of the meaning of a work – that might be crudely defined (and could still be exhaustively explored) within a generalisation like "the radical, primitive, and object-based expression of the context-forming ability to abstract" – has; funnier still, they have the will and power to discuss which of these implications are acceptable and which are not. Israel is pioneering a new – at least politically and diplomatically new genre through this: the local ramifications of this attitude can be easily observed on a daily basis in countries like Turkey, but until now it has been believed that the international arena is too prominent a platform for such displays of bravado; it requires a more discreet approach. After the question of aesthetics has been theorised for thousands of years, His Excellency the Israeli consul-general proudly boils down the perpetual search: "What is art? Whether or not something is art is in the eyes of the beholder. I decide whether this is a work of art or not."

The Israeli consul-general to Sweden offers this explanation because the roots of his resentment towards this work are enquired after he attacks the installation in the exhibition and damages its lighting system (whereupon he is being removed from the hall). "When my wife and I saw this thing while visiting the exhibition, we started shuddering."

What sent shivers down the consul-general's spine consists of a rectangular glass pool filled with a blood-red substance in which a ship floats, to whose mast a smiling, carefully made-up picture of a woman in a turban has been attached. The woman in the picture is the lawyer Hanadi Jaradat, mother of two, who conducted a suicide attack in a restaurant in Israel on October 4, killing 22.

Not falling apart from the path of the artists' intentions as was revealed in their statements, an utterly naive reading of the work within the context of this article would suggest that, it was meant to express that the woman in the picture is "human" enough to be able to smile – has no visible marks that distinguish her as a terrorist, and is someone whom we could gladly socialise with and accept as our own if she were to disassemble the bombs wired to her body and mingle with the public in one piece. The name "Snow White" seems to have a similar function, in that it tells us this woman could quickly and effortlessly be absorbed in our daily patterns, and that she is "like us". The fact that she floats in a bloodbath signifies that the perpetrator who conducted a terrorist attack is a "human being"; – in the terms of Benjamin, contrary to that metaphor which dominates through being perpetually reproduced as an act of law-preserving violence – she is not *an absolute evil, an abstract Hades, a ghost or vampire, the devil from hell, or a demon whose sole purpose is to bring chaos to the world*; although the act she conducted is utterly horrific, totally wrong, and inexplicably ruthless, she believes that she has an objective (even if it is impossible to achieve, even if we do not want her to achieve it, even if we fear that possibility of her achieving it, it is nonetheless an objective) and the bloodbath signifies that this objective is not *an unpronounceable, inexplicable absolute devilishness, an evil curse that is beyond the grasp of the human mind*. It attains this through another image that it reproduces.

This approach as deconstructed by the aforementioned reading of the work in question has become manifest in Turkey after two British targets were attacked by suicide bombers. A text analysis would reveal that the word "chaos" was the second most frequently used word by newscasters, officials and any person who addressed the public, to be surpassed only by the word "terror". We witnessed even more concrete references, such as when the Interior Minister of Turkey began his statements with sentences to the effect of "The acts of terror that serve the purpose of throwing our country to chaos...", or when interpretations as concrete were inserted between the lines.

We shall now briefly examine the activities that took place after the week in which two synagogues, the HSBC headquarters and the British consulate-general were bombed by suicide attackers. Just as the trauma caused by the self-reproach and embarrassment felt vis-à-vis the international arena due to the attacks on Turkish Jews was beginning to diminish, the two bombs directed to British targets initiated a much greater and distinct trauma. In order to fully express the degree of fluctuation experienced in the very short interval between the two attacks, it is necessary to draw attention to the forms acquired by Turkey's socio-political status, which manifests – and contradicts – itself in two extremes concerning national and international politics, and the shifting sands that has become ever so unreliable after the Turkish Parliament's (apparent) denial of sending troops to Iraq. As an act of terror inflicted by Muslim perpetrators on non-Muslim victims, the synagogue attacks underscore Turkey's (apparently) Islamic government and in a further context, its Islamic roots, making Turkey, or rather the Turkish government, implicitly define itself in the Islamic sphere as driven by an implicit feeling of being an accomplice, or at least possessing a collective unconscious. Words of sympathy from Europe after the attacks on Turkish Jews were not being heard; the mass media was keeping Europe's reaction to a distinct background. The second wave of attacks made the Turkish public accept that they were the target in the acts of terror; and happy that the European Parliament had similarly regarded itself as the actual target, interpreting the second act as an aggression towards Western democracy. The international arena accentuated

this aspect of Turkey and the words of sympathy followed this tread.

Prior to the second wave of attacks, the public awareness generally held that the first attacks were directed solely towards the Jews. But the fact that the second wave of attacks were directed solely towards British targets was barely pronounced, even on the day of the attack, even after Tony Blair, when queried about the attacks on a joint press conference with George W. Bush, commented brazenly that it would be unforgivable to restrict the responsibility of these attacks to the shoulders of *superheroes* whose aim was to save the world and emancipate humanity. The informational cliché which states that those who lost their lives in the attacks had *died for nothing*, and that they were victims of the *pathological minds* of some *purposeless* perpetrators is not, or at least should have not been, forgivable in Turkey. The attacks of November 2003 are still being reduced to suicide attacks conducted by the PKK, and are handled in the same category. Naturally, the scenario enacted in the public imagination cannot be read in a different way. When considering the increased burden on the Turkish culture of democracy, augmented by the partial legitimacy in the international arena of the concerns about a common Islamic unconscious revealed within the decision about Iraq, and keeping in mind how traumatic it is for Turkey to hold the grasp of the naïve dichotomy of "western democracy vs. absolute evil" in this context – it is possible to foresee the complexity and force of the impact that the following quote will have on the public:

Nurullah Kuncak (the only son of the suicide attacker Ilyas Kuncak, who died on the second wave of attacks in Istanbul. He is 17 and regards himself as the patriarch of his family.) replies to the following questions:

– *Your father was still at home when the synagogues were attacked. What opinions did you share?*

– There was no overreaction, because it was against the Jews. After all, the Koran says, "do not befriend Jews".

– *Did you not like the Jews?*

– We did not like them much. In fact, we did not like them at all. Nobody would like them if they knew what is going on in Palestine.

– *Did you rejoice over the attacks?*

– We did not rejoice, but we were happy. However, we were more sad than happy, because some Muslims had died as well. The sorrow surpassed the happiness. I would rejoice if no Muslims had died. My father had said, "Such things harm Islam." He left the house on Monday. The other explosions happened on Thursday."<sup>1</sup>

Leaving these quotes aside and concentrating on the basic facts, it is clear that the two attacks in Istanbul, the first on the two synagogues and the second against the British targets, did not have Turkey in their sight as their target. As Nurullah Kuncak remarks in the interview that has been partially quoted above, "The attacks in Istanbul were not directed towards Turks or Muslims. If that was the case, the bombers could have entered a stadium, killing 50 to 60 thousand people." Meanwhile, the attackers were not a group of hell-bound lost souls whose aim was to wreak havoc across beautiful Istanbul; they were *human beings*, their actions had a *context*, and in a deeper sense, an *objective*. Although the aforementioned fluctuations are long forgotten and the two attacks have melted to one in the public imagination, we should not for a moment forget that Turkish citizens who had no connection to the conflict in Iraq lost their lives in these attacks. Ignoring this is rotten at best, but possesses certain advantages: As Noam Chomsky stated in his article "Selective

Memory" on December 21 2003, "It protects us from the danger of understanding what is happening before our eyes." Realising that the perpetrators of these attacks were *human beings identical to us* is, if we have the courage to understand what is happening before our eyes, is the first, perhaps most innocent, but definitely the most fundamental and horrifying step in this direction.

Upon returning to the installation by Dror Feiler and Gunilla Sköld Feiler; if the above remarks about this piece can be deemed valid, the consul-general's opinion that "this thing sublimates the suicide attacker" will also be valid, or, at least, possess a value that may not be cast aside as a misunderstanding. The installation created tension between Sweden and Israel, and resulted in threats against various people from the museum manager to the artist, whilst categorically verifying an abstracted, deleted, obscured identity that hides behind the veil of inconspicuousness/imperceptibility through presenting it via a made-up face and a warm smile; and this is exactly what we need – if we are to speak about our needs. The problem is that the consul-general did not consider it with its categorical value. Excluding its poetical potential, the consul-general thinks simply about whether or not there is an objective "need" for the work before him, which does not have anything to do with its appraisal – clearly showing that the "need" for the consul-general himself and the likes of him is diminishing day by day. If we were to read the reaction of the consul-general in its "categorical value"... ("At its onset, jurisdiction was content with winning decisive victories through the confidence in its triumphant power over the lawbreaker at every point of contact; [...] the jurisdiction of later ages had reached the conclusion that it did not deserve the power others had because of the lack of confidence in its own power," remarked Benjamin in his criticism of violence, "its fear of power [violence] and lack of self-confidence is a sign of its diminishing necessity. The law-enforcer starts setting objectives for itself with the orientation of granting more demanding manifestations to violence.") Actually, given to context of this article, it is best we do not read it in this fashion, because there is something else that we should read – a passage which tells us where does poetry reside in relation to our "needs":

"I do not say that poetry cannot be 'a way to know'; I hold that it will be a correct approach to discuss a different 'knowledge' and a 'way to know'. [...] I will give a recent and dangerous example: as the lorry that contained the bombs which would devastate the British Consulate-General was approaching its target, the driver of the vehicle behind it had watched as the lorry driver struck the barriers, hit the curb, but still managed to breach the wall of the consulate without losing control. That night, everyone was reflecting on what had been experienced during the day, so was I. But when I read the testimonial of the eyewitness the next day, I was given to thinking about that terrorist's psyche, chain of thought, the inability of his struggling mind in overcoming the will that had set him on his target... Moreover, I was compelled to reflect on the reason for our ignorance, or even refusal of knowledge, on these matters. Poetic licence is formed where the mind says yes, where the organic motives concealed inside the body overflow. The insertion of poetry into this complex reality is different from other methods of rationalising and establishing cognitive links. [...] Poetry may offer the unexpected (or, I insist: unwanted) answer: after all, few people want to understand the psyche of the terrorist in such matters; the wounded society shrilly complains the futility of such an attempt; this is why there is no longer any need for poetry." ("Umutsuz Olmayan Sairler Karamsardir [The Poet Who is Not Hopeless is Pessimistic]", An Interview with Enis Batur, *Cogito* 38, pp. 109–10.)

An extensive review by Nikola Tietze on research on suicide-bombers was published in the German journal *Mittelweg 36*, please see:  
<http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-07-04-tietze-de.html> (text in German)

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<sup>1</sup> For the interview conducted in Turkish, please see:  
<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2003/12/05/guncel/agun.html>

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