

Fear of Flying (I): Samson Airline

On my way from New Zealand to Aberystwyth, I went first to the United States for the PSi conference at Brown University – titled “Becoming Uncomfortable”.¹ While in transit, I became uncomfortable at the thought of going through the security procedures at American air terminals, as I had heard that they were unpleasant, if not threatening – especially for non-Americans. In travelling within New Zealand, I was aware that I now needed to be screened before going to the gate and that I shouldn’t have scissors or other sharp implements in my hand luggage. Not much else has changed since 9/11. Going from New Zealand to the United States, however, the first thing that happened was that we had to go through the screening process twice, the second time in greater conformity with US procedures.

This is what happened to me when I arrived at the San Francisco airport. First I filled out the form. [Fig. 1: “Welcome to the United States.”] Here are some of the questions I was asked [Fig. 2: “Do any of the following apply to you?”]:

- A. Do you have a communicable disease; physical or mental disorder; or are you a drug abuser or addict?
- B. Have you ever been arrested or convicted for an offense or crime involving moral turpitude or a violation related to a controlled substance; or been arrested or convicted for two or more offenses for which the aggregate sentence to confinement was five years or more; or been a controlled

¹ PSi11 “Becoming Uncomfortable”, Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island), 30 March – 3 April, 2005.

substance trafficker or; or are you seeking entry to engage in criminal or immoral activities?

- C. Have you ever been or are you now involved in espionage or sabotage; or in terrorist activities; or genocide; or between 1933 and 1945 were you involved in any way, in persecutions associated with Nazi Germany or its allies?

This is nothing new, and I had filled in this form many times before, regarding it as quaint: do Americans think I would be so stupid as to say yes to any of these questions? And I was even tempted at times to do so, just for fun. In light of what happened to me this time, however, it was no joke.

After queuing with the other aliens at Passport Control, I arrived at the counter. I was asked by the Immigration Officer to put my left index finger into a device which was taking my fingerprint. This is, in my culture as in the US, indelibly mixed up with the idea of being a criminal. The officer made sure that I pressed my finger properly by putting his finger on mine. I did not think this was an innocuous thing to do, as it evoked a feeling as if I was under strong suspicion of having committed a crime just by being who I was, a feeling that reminded me of the ordeals I had to go through when I crossed the Iron Curtain in years past. Then I was asked to put my right index finger into another spot on the machine, to have my right index fingerprinted. This seemed to me like overkill. Does my right hand not know what my left hand does? That not being sufficient, I had to take off my glasses and hold my left eye to a lens. By then I was having to work hard to suppress a feeling of paranoia.

At the gate to get to the plane to New York, this feeling of paranoia continued to grow. It began as elsewhere, with the placing of my hand luggage, jacket, wallet

and other belongings on the conveyor. When I crossed the threshold of the portal, I thought I was finished and wanted to gather my belongings. But no. A guard came up to me held me back, closed a rope barrier in front of me and asked me to wait in a cordoned off area, where I watched someone use a chemical patch to examine the insides of my bag while it was still on the conveyor. I asked the man who was standing, watching, guarding me at that stage, what these patches were doing, but he did not care to explain. Then I saw my luggage and belongings being taken to a table where someone in latex gloves began to examine the contents closely.

My guard lifted the rope and directed me towards a plastic chair across from the table with my belongings. Under the chair was a plastic basin. I didn't know if it was for vomit or urine. This time I did not ask. I was directed to sit down and take off my shoes, which were taken away and examined. I was told to lift my left leg and then my right, so that the man examining my person could both wand and touch them with his latex-gloved hands on all sides. Then I had to stand up, spread my arms in the position of the cross, and I was again wanded and touched all over. When he came to my front pocket, I still had my handkerchief in it, which I had to take out so that he could touch me closer to my skin. He spoke to me when he touched close to my genitals, warning me that he would do so. This created a strange confusion for me. Why would he want to tell me?

As my genitals were being touched, I saw the man at the table going through the individual pages of my diary. Obviously, in this act there was a connection between intimacy and surveillance, which until this time I had only known from reports in newspapers and books, not from personal experience. Abu Ghraib came to mind, even though it's obviously not on to compare the security check at airport with extortion and torture in an Iraqi prison. But what I did not think was that this was

about security any longer. This seemed to me like an act of intimidation or psychological terror. Why? When I talked about my experience with some of my American friends, they didn't understand my feelings and said things like: "They're just doing their job." But what is the job that they are doing? Is there something more than safety going on?

The reason given for all these safety procedures is the events of 9/11. That is, the purpose is to prevent another event like 9/11. But the actual effect of these procedures is that the events of 9/11 are kept alive in the minds both of the passengers and of airport personnel. These procedures are so excessive as to move us from the functional to the symbolic, the ritual. The memory of 9/11 is thus revived in a ritual that is repeated millions of times in hundreds of places, so that the event itself comes to take on qualities of a modern myth.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard calls the events of 9/11 "our theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left" (Baudrillard 2002: 30). He also calls it "the purest form of spectacle" and sees it following the "sacrificial model" (Baudrillard 2002: 30). I would like to extend Baudrillard's suggestion by claiming that the rituals that are being performed at airports as they may be seen to commemorate 9/11 have also come to follow the sacrificial model. These rituals are performed in a way that is like the way that Greek tragedy commemorated and kept myth alive, and that Christian ritual still acts to reiterate and keep alive its founding myths.

Aristotle explains in his *Poetics* how the performance of tragedy creates a community through pity and fear (or terror, as some translate it), through the identification of the audience with the tragic hero, who becomes the scapegoat who is

sacrificed in the course of events. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard says: “The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 1977: 8). He also says: “Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of ‘good’ violence” (Girard 1977: 37). In the airport security ritual, we are made to identify with both the perpetrators and the victims of 9/11 – as in *Oedipus Rex*, Aristotle’s preferred example. We are the suspects who could have box-cutters in our bags or bombs in our shoes. We are also the victims who might be entering our flying funeral pyres. Augusto Boal, in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, calls the Greek tragedy of Aristotle’s *Poetics* an extremely efficient system of coercion, a psycho-political process.

As in Greek tragedy, the airport security ritual provides a compressed experience in which we are forced to recall our originary myth and become part of a globalised community. We are confronted with the terrorist in ourselves and in each other, but also can experience ourselves and each other as victims as we confront the possibility that we too might be sacrificed. In identifying we cannot be critical. We cannot stand outside the ritual. We are prevented from analysis and inhibited from taking action. In condoning the symbolic violence against ourselves, we are also condoning the actual violence that is being committed in our names, around ourselves at airports and beyond. In *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, Helene Foley says “Participation in sacrifice binds the worshiper to his community, organises his place in that community, and implicitly obtains his consent to the violence upon which this organisation is in part predicated” (Foley 1985: 39).

Reading the airport security ritual in the context of Christian myth and ritual, I come to similar conclusions. Again we are identifying both with Jesus Christ, the sacrificial lamb, and with the sinners for whom he sacrificed himself: the victims and

the perpetrators of 9/11. In the succession of Christ, we have to part with our worldly goods; we have to remove our outer garments and adornments such as belts, we cross a threshold, and we take on the position of the cross. We even have our feet examined as the guards kneel in an odd mimicry of Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet. If we falter or fail at any stage of the ritual, we risk excommunication. The fulfilment of the airport security ritual is that we are allowed to enter the plane and to fly into the sky, the heavens. But we are also then in danger of repeating the events of 9/11, with its contradictory images of the Christian tradition: images of the Day of Judgment, of the Apocalypse, of Purgatory and Hell – again conflating the archetypes of the martyrs and the damned in the image of the Fall.

When Baudrillard talks about the event of 9/11 as “our theatre of cruelty” he sees it as an event that breaks through the impossibility of representation or meaning in performance. Artaud wrote in a 1947 letter to André Breton that society no longer understands any language, “except bombs, machine guns, barricades and everything else that follows” (quoted in Hayman 1996: 20). He says, “in the state of degeneration we are in, it is through the skin that the metaphysical will re-enter the mind” (Artaud 1958: 99). In this light, it could be that in the performance of the airport security ritual we have created a perverse sort of participatory Artaudian repertory theatre, a theatre that moves from surveillance to touching the skin as it projects the terror of the state into each individual participant.

In my 2002 production, *Samson Airline*, I used the story of Samson – one of the predecessors of Christ – as an example of the first suicide terrorist, who kills 3000 Philistines by bringing down the temple on himself and them. This seemed to me both comparable to the airplanes flying into the capitalist temple of the Trade Towers, where three thousand were killed, but also a kind of a reversing of the idea that the

suicide terrorists were criminal or cowards, seeing them instead in the Judeo-Christian tradition of heroic self-sacrifice for God and the people against false Mammon.

The set was a simulation of an airplane, with a flight simulator in the cockpit. The actors were flight attendants and captains. The audience presented their boarding passes and entered as if embarking on a flight, and were treated as passengers throughout. The normal airline procedures were treated as religious rituals, starting with the demonstration of safety protocols, the ritual of washing with a hot cloth, the preparing of food as a burnt offering – using blow torches and tongs – the offering of drinks and the selling of artefacts, all centred around the Samson story, which was told as the in-flight entertainment. Additional to the Samson story in the Bible, ritual aspects of the performance included the chanting of texts from the Koran and Mohammed Atta's writings, the prayers that he wrote down for himself and his comrades as preparation for death. As part of the text, the actors were encouraged to speak their autobiographies in relation to the story of Samson, the Palestinian suicide bombers and the "martyrs" of 9/11.

The actors and audiences were put in a position of trying to understand the acts of Samson and Atta as a kind of sacrifice which gives meaning to a world overrun by philistines. The production invoked identification with both the terrorists and the victims in order at least to point to contradictions in the way 9/11 has been represented in the media – in particular, the images of the Fire and Fall and the question of their meanings. By using the biblical story of Samson, I was trying to undermine the predominantly Christian readings of 9/11, in which the Islamic actors have been seen to be evil beyond imagination, when in fact the tradition of self-sacrifice is at the core of the Christian myth. As such *Samson Airline* was a way of attempting to make sense of the events of 9/11 in a way which I assume I could not

have ventured in the United States, where such a production would most likely be viewed as blasphemy. Even in New Zealand, it was hugely problematic.

I am not suggesting that someone now stage the procedures of airport security as a way of exposing and understanding the forces currently driving the dominant culture. Rather, it is possible that seeing and discussing these procedures as already both theatricalised and ritualised, is in itself an offence and a kind of blasphemy, which we need to commit.

REFERENCES

- Artaud, Antonin (1958) *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richard, New York: Grove Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean (2002) *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso.
- Boal, Augusto (1979) *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, New York: Urizen Books.
- Foley, Helene P. (1985) *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Girard, Rene (1977) *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hayman, Ronald (1996) 'Antonin Artaud', in Margit Rowell (ed) *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalisation Service, *I-94W Nonimmigrant Visa Waiver Arrival/Departure Form*.