

Comments on the Retreat into Reality by Stephen Tateishi

The title of Rachel Frank's performance piece "Sleep of Reason" references Francisco Goya's best-known etching, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." The etching is part of the series "Los Caprichos" in which the artist claims to depict "...[subjects] from amongst the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual..."¹ "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" was etched in the year 1797 towards the end of the French Revolution (the event that introduced the *Rights of Man* as the basis for our modern conception of human rights and citizenship) and the same year that Kant published his *Metaphysics of Morals* (a major work of applied moral philosophy wherein Kant extrapolates a peaceful and moral community from the famous categorical imperative and his "Doctrine of Right"). In this context, it seems clear that the etching (and the series as a whole) champions the ideals of Reason over and against the recidivism into superstition and irrationality. Witness the figure whose head lies upon the desk: With the slumbering of the Aufklärung, Reason's guard is down and, from the unlegislated depths of the unconscious, the frightening creatures that haunt men's minds make their nocturnal return. The grammar of the work's title, then, is direct and unambiguous: "The Sleep of Reason" is to be understood as "Reason's sleeping," which is to say, more technically now, that the title is to be read in the possessive or genitive case such that "sleep" modifies "reason" (so, as previously noted, the event of reason's "having fallen asleep" is what causes or allows for the "production of monsters").

All of this is perfectly clear and uncontested; and yet, another reading is possible. By turning the phrase around somewhat—but now in light of Frank's provocative performance piece (in which a political critique of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib is staged via references to several key figures from Goya's "Los Caprichos")—this seemingly clear grammar begins to lend itself to another reading, namely, that *reason itself* could be something like a slumber, and that *through this sleep* monsters might also be produced. Now, granted, to read the phrase this way is something less than grammatically intuitive. It may even border on being counter-grammatically intuitive. Nonetheless, it seems permissible to understand the phrase in this less familiar manner and in such a way that its paraphrase would instead run something like, "the sleep *induced or caused by* reason produces monsters." In fact, to read it this way is not so hard: It would simply be to understand it as one generally understands a phrase like "the dream of freedom"—not that it is "freedom's dream," preeminently, but rather that the "dream" itself is brought about or provoked by the idea of "freedom." So a potentially different way of understanding the phrase...but this still begs the question: What, exactly, would be the point of such grammatical contortionism?

Let us take Jacques Lacan's reading of Sigmund Freud's case, "The Dream of the Burning Child," as a reference. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud recounts how a father had fallen asleep while the body of his dead son lay resting in the adjacent room. In the father's dream, his dead son is suddenly standing beside him. The body of the boy is engulfed flames; the words that issue from the child's mouth form a horrible reproach: "*Father, can't you see I'm burning?*" Immediately, the father awakens. He discovers that, as he slept, a candle had fallen over and set fire to his dead son's shroud. How are we to read this dream? First, the common

interpretation: The external event of the fire is incorporated into dream in order to allow the father to continue sleeping (much like the ringing of an alarm clock is incorporated into a dream when one does not want to wake up and go to work); however, when the external stimuli becomes too great, the father is forced awake. Against this traditional reading, Lacan offers a rather surprising alternative, one that transposes the very designations of what is traditionally taken for reality and what is traditionally taken for a dream. Rather than the “true” reality forcing the father to awake from his “imaginary” dream, Lacan suggests that the *truth of the dream* (namely, the father’s guilt as manifested by the horrible words spoken to him through the son, “*Father, can’t you see I’m burning?*”) proves to be so unbearable that the father *awakes into reality in order to continue dreaming*, that is, he awakes into “reality” in order to avoid his real guilt and continue to “dream” that he is essentially innocent. As noted, the radicality of Lacan’s interpretation lies in the inversion of our typical understanding of what is “real” and what is a “dream.” In this case, the “real” is found in what we would typically call a “dream” (the father’s confrontation with his own guilt through the words, “*Father, can’t you see I’m burning?*”); whereas the “dream” (or, for our purposes: What allows the father to continue to “sleep,” in the sense of his avoiding the truth of his guilt) is what we would typically think of as “reality.” Now if we apply the same logic to Goya’s title, we might understand “Sleep of Reason” anew: Namely, that *it is Reason itself* that allows us to escape from our confrontation with our true guilt. But what exactly would this guilt be? In the context of Frank’s performance piece, it would be our guilt over the events at Abu Ghraib; and more generally (and, admittedly, beyond the specific scope of Frank’s work), it would be our guilt for a slumber that allows events such as Abu Ghraib to occur, as well as a “desire to sleep” that, time and again, retreats into “reality” in order to evade its truth.

In light of the horrors of Abu Ghraib, it is preferable to think that the monsters produced at the prison bear specific names like Lynndie England, Charles Graner, Sabrina Harman, or the names of the other prison guards and interrogators who participated in these acts of abuse—and we might still go further, extending this list of ghouls right up the chain of command to include, among many others, John Yoo, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and George W. Bush. And in this scenario, America’s own “sleep of reason” could be equated with something like “the Bush presidency” (and, certainly, if we were to do so the list of monsters would be impressive); in addition, we might allow that, in the wake of 9/11 and in the unprecedented “state of exception” that followed, America may at times have acted wrongly but, as unfortunate as the consequences were, America also acted out of necessity, and while the suspension of certain notions of due process and humanity may have allowed for freedom and democracy to temporarily fall asleep, this sleep was not permanent; for finally, although Reason may have slumbered throughout the duration of Bush’s two terms, wakefulness was eventually restored with the election of Barack Obama, which, rounding out this scenario, would be something like our country’s return to reality.

Although not necessarily a popular position, I would like to suggest a less optimistic reading of our present condition.

Before proceeding, however, it’s important to recall that, in terms of international and constitutional law, the Bush administration’s most striking accomplishment was the institution of an ongoing and continuous “state of exception” in which, by claiming the right to its own defense, the State is able to suspend the Law and create spheres of action that no longer operate within its reaches but instead act unilaterally and out of supposed conditions of “necessity.”²

(The notion, for instance, that unlawful aggression in foreign territories, the torture of detainees, or the killing of innocent civilians are justified in order to save American lives—has allowed our government to breach international treaties with impunity, all the while claiming to answer to a higher Law.)

Now without attempting to weigh-in on the ultimate similarities or differences between the Bush and Obama administrations' attitudes towards international law (as they are far from the identical)—and by no means possessing any sympathy for the reactionary and, at times, racist attitudes of the “Tea Party movement”—it is nonetheless essential to note several disquieting facts about the current administration's policies with regard to this “state of exception,” and the violence that this “state” continues to authorize. Fortunately or unfortunately, space will only allow for three examples:

First: Although Obama promised to close Guantánamo and declared in his “Remarks by the President on National Security” that “the rationale for establishing Guantánamo in the first place was the misplaced notion that a prison there would be beyond the law,”³ on September 16, 2009, his administration filed a brief with a federal appeals court in Washington arguing that the roughly 645 detainees at the Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan are not entitled to have their cases heard in U.S. courts. As the ACLU writes, “In June 2008, in the landmark case of *Boumediene v. Bush*, the U.S. Supreme Court found that detainees at Guantánamo were entitled to habeas corpus rights. In contravention of the principles established in that ruling, the Obama administration is now arguing that these rights do not apply at Bagram.”⁴ To make matters worse, U.S. officials have conceded that Bagram currently acts as a holding site for detainees who have been captured *outside of Afghanistan*. This suggests that, although Obama has promised to end “renditions” and to close down the CIA's secret prisons, the CIA can, in theory, now simply hand over detainees to the U.S. military and “hold” them at Bagram without due process or judicial oversight.

Second: Just before accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama announced he was sending 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan. Nine days later in his Nobel acceptance speech, Obama declared that the U.S. has the right to wage wars “unilaterally.” The text of the UN Charter would disagree. In the Charter (of which the U.S. was a founding signatory), “unilateral” force is illegal unless used in self-defense. Since the country of Afghanistan has never declared war on the U.S., Obama's escalation perpetuates the illegal pattern of aggression that was begun by the Bush administration in Afghanistan and continued in Iraq.

Third: The Obama administration has authorized the use of drones for air strikes in Pakistan (again, a country with whom we are not officially at war) with the intent of targeted killing, i.e. assassinations. Both the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions prohibit willful killings—or “extrajudicial executions.”⁵ The fact that these killings are not only willful but are authorized outside of the juridical system—which precisely provides safeguards for the accused—makes these acts illegal and punishable as war crimes.

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So is the point then that everything is more or less the same as when Bush was in office? Obviously not. The danger for us, however, is that we retreat into our own “dream” of America's return to Reason by failing to acknowledge the harsh facts of Obama's foreign policy. Like the father in Lacan's interpretation of “The Dream of the Burning Son,” we may in fact be retreating towards a false “reality” in order to

avoid confronting the unthinkable: Namely, that the suspensions of Law that led to the abuses at Abu Ghraib and at black sites hidden around the world were *not symptoms of the exception but rather of the rule* of our current state of affairs. For as attractive as it would be to think otherwise, our guilt with regards to America's foreign policy has little to do with party affiliations or eloquence of speech. It has to do with names like Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, Bagram, and with those undisclosed black sites that we want to believe are closed once and for all; and our guilt has to do with the Patriot Act, and the military order named "Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism," and with the "Insurrection Act" (renamed the "Enforcement of the Laws to Restore Public Order" by Bush) which nullifies *posse comitatus* and which remains in force today. These physical sites and these laws are the signifiers that ensnare all of our world—the detainees, the suspected terrorists, the illegal immigrants, but also you and me and anyone who finds themselves subject to our current policies throughout the globe—in a paradoxical and insidious form of law whose extraordinary force comes from its very power to suspend the Law itself.

Which is to say: The permanent "state of exception" in which we live will not go away by itself. And it will not go away by replacing one head of state with another. Bush is gone and this is a good thing. But it does not mean that we can congratulate ourselves and rest assured that, in his absence, all is well. Yet this is precisely the sort of sleep that Reason can provoke...

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In 1940, one of the great thinkers of our last century, Walter Benjamin, wrote his collection of theses entitled "On the Concept of History." In light of this essay, the eighth thesis is worth quoting in full:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm.— The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.⁶

1. Robert Hughes, *Goya* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2003), 181.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003), 50.
3. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-On-National-Security-5-21-09/
4. <http://www.aclu.org/national-security/obama-admin-seeks-deny-bagram-prisoners-access-us-courts>
5. <http://www.counterpunch.org/cohn12212009.html>
6. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings v. 4* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2003), 392.