

# Francis

IN THE PAST weeks our demons have returned to haunt us. Blake Morrison's personalised account of the of the Bulger murder in Liverpool, and Michael Howard's pronouncements on Myra Hindley and Ian Brady have revived memories of events that have attained the status of myth. In both cases the murders and the images associated with the murders have assumed an importance above the merely documentary.

The iconic photographic portrait of Myra Hindley from the 1960s, her unforgettable eyes staring darkly at the camera, has once again surfaced in the newspapers. Its air of brooding menace has become so saturated



UNKNOWN: 17th Century Dutch Emblem

with associations of evil that it easily eclipses the more recent images of a softer, kind-looking middle-aged woman. The equally iconic image of James Bulger, taken from a security camera recording his meeting with two older boys, has similarly reappeared across the media.

In Britain, today, these images signify evil. The flatness and banality of both photographs allow the imagination no purchase on the notion of communality or shared distress. Hindley's portrait is too furious

to admit us to any understanding, while the security camera in Liverpool keeps us at an unacceptable distance from the acts we witness. It seems important that both images are in grainy black and white and that both are the product of the camera as a mundane documentary tool. There is a tacit agreement that no art or artifice has been involved in the production of the two pictures and this has contributed to their power, they are taken as proof of the existence of some incomprehensible and occult force that we cannot hope to comprehend.

At this level, the images function as some sort of folk representation of evil, portraying it as a concept alien to most of us. This stance is consolidated by the media's general approach to the subject which is based on sentimental notions of benevolence and emotive descriptions of 'tragedy'. These descriptions often seem to distort the real and immense suffering of the victims families into an oversimplified scene of woe to which we can only respond on an emotional level. Ultimately, this kind of coverage leaves us feeling helpless.

For the contemporary artist, the power exercised by these images poses a real threat in that they severely limit the boundaries of what can be said about human nature. Given their use in the media (and their exploitation by election-minded politicians), the images and events surrounding the Bulger and Hindley cases have become so charged that any discussion of the murders has become taboo. The only safe option is to sympathise with the victims, condemn the killers and distance ourselves from the acts as much as possible.

Moreover, the impact of this new taboo can be felt in all our representations of morality. Dunblane, drug-taking and sex crimes have all become subjects so fraught with condemnation that no sophisticated debate can take place around them. In some cases, the media straitjacket on morality now verges on obscenity itself. J.G. Ballard, in his notes to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, comments that:

"The equivalent of the US television commercial on British TV is the 'serious' documentary, the ostensibly high-minded 'news' programme that gives a seductive authority to the manipulated images of violence and suffering offered by the conscience-stricken presenters—an even more insidious form of pornography."

The media representation of social problems has reduced our world to a simple morality play of good versus evil. If we are to understand anything about

# A Touch of Evil

Mckee

## I saw Satan Fall Like Lightning Luke, 10:18

human nature this needs to be resisted. In the visual arts, in particular, the problem has urgency, given the growing pressure on galleries to self censor work that may suggest we all have dark urges.

In the case of the Bulger murder, Jamie Wagg's "History Paintings" of the security camera photograph were removed from the Whitechapel Gallery's Open Exhibition after prolonged attack by the tabloids in 1994. The images were already rendered unforgettable through their exposure in the news media, yet their reproduction outside of that arena was considered an 'outrage'.

Mark Cousins, in an essay analysing the furore around Wagg's paintings notes that

"The work seeks to set the image of the boys in a public space of memory which does not repeat identification but works through them. It is a work in search of a public sphere in which canonic images are set within the historical and political conditions of their emergence. It is probably right that the newspapers expressed such outrage, for the work challenges the space of representation and identification within which newspapers coin it."<sup>1</sup>

This search for a public sphere in which to interrogate not only 'canonic images' but a multiplicity of moral and natural impulses has more recently gained momentum. Again, the murder of James Bulger seems to have provided the starting point for much of this new debate. David Jackson, for instance, in a short book on the killing, clears away much of the obfuscation around the notion of 'evil' which permeates most accounts of the incident:

"If we want to prevent another James Bulger killing from occurring again we have to start by challenging the tabloid voices that are constructing the two boys as folk devils. For example, the Daily Star leader for November 25th, 1993 needs to be challenged. It spoke of seeing 'pure evil' in the faces of the two boys and insisted that; 'As Long as they both draw breath, they must never be released.' In challenging this we have to say firmly and clearly, that the two boys aren't devils. Despite being extremely disturbed, they are both more like ordinary, working class boys than exceptional monsters. Right under our noses, on a regular, daily basis, destructive and damaging things are being done to the lives of many of our boys. But we still react with surprised, innocent shock to these happenings as if we can't bear to acknowledge where they come from."<sup>2</sup>

Jackson is of a growing group of writers and thinkers who are attempting to confront the savage, natural instincts that we all share. Others like Blake Morrison and Gitta Sereny, both attracted to the murder of James Bulger are likewise undertaking personal explorations of the nature of what we term evil. Sereny, in her recent biography of Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, has provided a stark insight into the way in which a man can slide into connivance with a system of brutality. Moreover, she penetrates the self-deceptions and defences Speer raised against his own knowledge of his activities and acknowledges the human suffering he experienced in doing so. Describing the aim of her book as an attempt 'to learn to understand Speer' she points out 'while in such encounters it is essential never to pretend agreement with the unacceptable, moral indignation for its own sake is an unaffordable luxury.'<sup>3</sup>

These accounts of personal morality and the intimate response to what we describe as evil have, however, been paralleled by more scientific approaches such as that of Richard Dawkins. Speaking on the apparently different subject of DNA, in *River out of Eden*, he outlines an unsentimental view of the universe:

"Nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent...We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous—indifferent to suffering, lacking all purpose. In a universe

of blind physical force and genetic replication some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The Universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."

This neo-Darwinian statement of evolutionary process offers us a contemporary existential landscape in which to make a more honest appraisal of our general human condition. At first glance, it seems fairly bleak but there is no reason why it should become a landscape of despair. Dawkins, like Sereny and Jackson, has simply asked us to be honest about the darker side of our natures and to accept the savage indifference of life. From that point, he believes it possible to build something more lasting. Even the myths he appears to attack are left intact. Dawkins himself, in his choice of book titles such as *The Blind Watchmaker* and *River Out of Eden* is only too aware of the imaginative power of the metaphor.

Although, for Dawkins, this approach eventually leads to a renunciation of God there is no good reason why this has to be. In *Ecclesiastes*, we can find statements comparable to his own, such as: "Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared for an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." There is an acknowledgement of the random and democratic nature of evil that is as strong as anything by Dawkins or even Nietzsche, who wrote: "There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena."<sup>4</sup>

In the visual arts, this stance may appear difficult to articulate. Goya's *Capriccios*, for instance, deal with evil but within the larger context of nightmare and madness, as if the artist is overwhelmed by the vision of nature he has evoked. Among contemporary artists, though, Gerhard Richter has succeeded in expressing a clear acknowledgement of the need to approach the subject in a tempered frame of mind:

"26 June 1992. It might be for us to look on killing as part of our own nature—of the very nature that we seek to regard as our antithesis, as in the inhuman, 'blind' nature of natural disasters, carnivorous animals and exploding stars.

Our behaviour conforms to this nature in two ways: on the one hand as active killing, both in wars and as civilian murder; on the other in the still more horrifying passive mode of assent (we watch the news while eating dinner; we enjoy seeing murders in films). This is because of the way we take death for granted: just as we know that we are alive, we know that we die; death comes as naturally to us as life. The instinct to stay alive limits our compassion and our willingness to help; we give our help and our pity only under duress, and when it seems to be to our own advantage.

The suppression and repression of these facts gives rise to dangerous delusions, the politics of hypocrisy, false and lying actions.

And yet to accept them would be so unimaginable and so unworkable that we knowingly and impotently prefer to allow for—that is, include in our plans—all future catastrophes."<sup>5</sup>

Cady Noland, in her essay, *Towards a Metalanguage of Evil*, adopts a similar baseline in her interpretation of nature, but carves out a much more sophisticated position for the artist. Acknowledging what Richter has called the 'blind Nature' in all of us, Noland goes on to describe a society founded on a game in which the rules are often hidden and many of us are lost in 'a world of deceit'. Essentially, she describes a world which Richard Dawkins would recognise as the Darwinian survival of the fittest, though Noland views it through the lens of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. In her world, everyone assumes an element of disguise or artifice,

conning each other strategically for their own ends:

"Conning devices are tools. The degree of harm they do, if any, depends upon the purpose for which they are instrumented. Where the "mirror device" might be used by a parent to encourage a child, or by a psychiatrist as a therapeutic device, it is also used by ambitious students, known otherwise as "brown-nosers" or "ass-kissers", who cynically reword the opinions of their teachers in their written and oral work. People also use the "mirror device" to "pass", as Erving Goffman points out. A high school girl may try to hide her intelligence and assume a "light-weight" persona instead of going dateless. Goffman details this and Many other versions of "passing" in his book STIGMA."

The "mirror device" is a tool with which to mollify Y, and render him more pliable to X's manipulations. Malignant use of the "mirror device" abounded in Nazi Germany. To cite just one example, a perfect imitation of the Treblinka Railway Station was constructed for the express purpose of lulling prisoners into thinking they'd arrived at an apparently benign destination. This so-called station was actually a killing center."<sup>6</sup>

Cady Noland's world is not so far from that of *Les Liasons*

*Dangereuses*—a world of strategies in which everyone plays or is played upon. The consequences can be horrific as she points out in her reference to Treblinka, but she is not advocating any closure of the game. She is simply saying the game and its rules continue whether we like it or not, and we must acknowledge its existence if we are to play it successfully or change it.

For the contemporary artist, the 'game' is vital. Artifice, after all, is an essential element of art. The very notion of artifice may have been tarnished by the superficialities and power games of the 1980's but it would be naive to abandon the concept itself. Recasting it, as Noland has done, in a sphere which demands greater self-awareness and an understanding of Machiavellian designs offers an alternative to the simplicities of tabloid culture.

In his introduction to *The Return of The Real* Hal Foster writes of the "fundamental stake in art and academy: the preservation, in an administered, affirmative culture, of spaces for critical debate and alternative vision."<sup>7</sup> In Britain, today, these spaces are diminishing and real critical debate has been reduced to a trickle of coded signals. This is not to advocate a highly politicised art movement. However, no matter how vibrant an art scene may appear to be, it requires the freedom to explore all dimensions of human nature if it is to continue to thrive.



DAVID SHRIGLEY Land Mine 1995

1. Mark Cousins, Security as Danger, 1996, p.8

2. David Jackson, 'Destroying the Baby in ourselves, 1995, pp 39-40.

3. Gitta Sereny, Albert Speer, His Battle With Truth, 1995, p14.

4. Fredrick Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 1886.

5. Gerhard Richter, Notes 1992, The Daily Practice of Painting, pp 242-243.

6. Cady Noland, Towards a Metalanguage of Evil, Documenta IX, 1992 pp 410-413. Many thanks to Eva Rothschild for pointing me at this essay and other necessary background material.

7. Hal Foster, The Return of the Real, 1996, xvii.