

Acknowledging Fascination with Catastrophe and Terrorism: September 11 and the Nuclear Destruction of Hiroshima/Nagasaki

Emmanouil Aretoulakis

Turning Away from Sublime Anti-Aestheticism

It is already a commonplace that twentieth century postmodern aesthetics privileged the category of the sublime over that of the beautiful. One only has to read Paul de Man or Jean Francois Lyotard to realize that the invocation of the sublime is a call for the deconstruction of aesthetics as a “positive” quality, at the same time that the beautiful stands for an aesthetics that is conventionalized.¹ For Lyotard, it is the failure of speech and artistic, or other, expression to represent accurately the ethical catastrophe of Auschwitz that calls for the empowerment of the sublime (as the “silent” or “formless”)—allegedly capable of preserving what he names “unpresentable” in history and philosophy. By contrast, the calm feeling of beauty is supposedly no longer able to communicate the real insofar as it is preoccupied with an idealized, transcendental and beautiful version of history that has nothing whatsoever to do with the real human condition.

At the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, there was a shift towards a reassessment of beauty and its importance in aesthetic as well as political matters. One can think of Elaine Scarry’s venture into the beautiful as ethical as well rather than purely and strictly aesthetic. In such a reading, beauty causes a decentering of the self which humbles the ego into more ethical and less egotistic behavior.² Beauty is gradually restored at the center of unconventional thought.

What happens when we start to think of extreme cases of violence such as the September 11 terrorist attacks or the Hiroshima/Nagasaki nuclear bombings in terms of the conceptual shift from the sublime to the beautiful? Wouldn’t that be an immoral or dangerous thing to do? I argue that it might not. I am proposing the possibility of a disinterested aesthetics entering the discussion of terrorism, an aesthetics which may not be *moral* in the traditional sense, but it certainly is *ethical* in a broader sense. Here, I am drawing upon Hillis Miller’s distinction between (human) law and (universal) justice.

Building upon Kant's notion of morality, Miller connects morality with the law and justice with ethics:

In a sense, you could argue that my imposition on the text is the act of identifying moral with a pre-existing existing law or habit or whatever. I call that morality, whereas, for me, ethics is always parallel to justice. . . . The word moral is often used in a condescending and in a denigrating way, to name the unreflective following of a moral rule by someone. Such people behave morally but they are not really just or ethical, precisely because they do not think of the unique circumstances. (2006, 23-34)

It is true that eminent philosophers such as Jacques Derrida rushed to call the 9/11 attacks “sublime.” 9/11 was not just a major event. It was also the key to the inconceivable. Derrida argued that “the brevity of the appellation [9/11]” constitutes a metonymy that “points out the unqualifiable. . . . Something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don’t know what” (Borradori 2003, 87). There lurks a negative kind of aesthetics herein. Derrida insinuates that we are at a loss figuring out the exact nature of terror we are dealing with. We are being dwarfed by something inconceivable. Nonetheless, such a statement risks placing a smokescreen before our eyes; the smokescreen at stake is related to the potentially positive subjective experience—a truly aesthetic experience of the beautiful—we may have had of the entire 9/11 visual event or spectacle. In other words, behind the horror, repulsion, and outrage lurked a kind of fascination that many of us, eye witnesses or other, did have (and do have with respect to other natural or man-made catastrophes) but would not want to acknowledge, and this is the forbidden feeling or disinterested experience that I am grappling with in this essay.³

Aesthetics, as is well-known, is a recent discipline dating back to the eighteenth century. Modern aesthetic theory, in its development during the eighteenth century, presented itself as a “discourse of shock and of shock absorption,” thus favoring the aesthetics of the sublime rather than the beautiful (Redfield 2007, 55-80). In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant argues that “the beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object’s] being bounded” (1952, 4). Before Kant, Edmund Burke had already introduced a more physiological and primitive version of the beautiful, according to which it is an aesthetic experience that strikes us “without any preparation” by “seizing upon the senses and imagination, [and] captivate[ing] the soul before the understanding is ready” to react (1986, 107). Burke thus prefigures Kant’s implication that beauty, albeit “bounded,” is an elusive concept while the feeling of the beautiful is a subjective sensation which is independent of moral preconceptions, laws, or inhibitions.

Aesthetic Judgment and Disinterested Pleasure in the Face of Terrorism

Aesthetics is a science that “aims at liberating itself from cognition,” simultaneously opening itself up to subjective experience, imagination, and individual taste (Nuzzo, 2006, 581). Therefore, sensibility comes before all knowledge of objects. In this light, it could generally be argued that before we try to understand catastrophe we have to sense it. In other words, we have to aesthetically appreciate the visual, or any other, aspect of it before we can cognitively grasp it. In the Introduction to *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant posits that there are two kinds of judgment, the determinant and the reflective or aesthetic. Determinant judgment takes us from the universal to the particular whereas reflective/aesthetic takes us from the particular to the universal: “If the universal (the rule, principle, or law) is given, then the judgment which subsumes the particular under it is determinant. . . . If, however, only the particular is given and the universal has to be found for it, then the judgment is simply reflective” (CJ, 17).

Determinant judgment is based on a priori conditions; therefore something beautiful is appreciated as such in accordance with some laws that precede or pre-empt it. Reflective or aesthetic judgment is based on a posteriori assessment; therefore the beautiful is not a matter of prescribed rules but of spontaneous subjective reaction. Real beauty, according to Kant, may be discerned through aesthetic judgment because this kind of judgment remains unaffected by any mental preconceptions or moral inhibitions carried by an individual. In this essay, I want to focus on the antithesis between the aesthetic and the determinant in order to demonstrate how the former—the act of aesthetically appreciating—is paradoxically seminal in doing justice to, comprehending as well as coping with man-made catastrophe. Moreover, I will show how an aesthetics of *beauty* is at stake when it comes to the sheer act of witnessing spectacular images of large-scale catastrophes. Arguably, to recognize the aesthetic appeal of those images is an act of individual freedom: freedom to feel beyond moral rules, political interests or logical precepts. In this sense, it is also an ethical act.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, avant-garde artists such as Damien Hirst and Karlheinz Stockhausen famously characterized them as visually stunning and a great performance, respectively.⁴ Such treatments of the attacks seem to subscribe to an aesthetic rather than determinant judgement of the entire event. The visually stunning artwork, as those artists argue, is something that those responsible need to be congratulated on since they have presumably gone where no one has gone before in terms of artistic achievement.

Isn't such a treatment insensitive to the victims of the attack, to say the least? On the other hand, a case might be made as to how wrong it is to dwell too long on the immorality

of an aesthetic appreciation of the event because to talk about morality surrounding an event would shift attention away from the event itself. In other words, it would mean to assess, for instance, the motives of the criminals and the consequences of their actions only, instead of focusing with disinterestedness also on the thing called 9/11 in itself as well as its visual representations. Kant discusses the problem of moral freedom in relation to beauty and art. He holds that the beautiful is “an object of delight apart from any interest. . . .” (*CJ*, 4)

Of course, Kant does not mean to associate the beautiful in nature with the aesthetic attraction towards man-made violence and terrorism, but he does touch upon the aesthetic powerfulness of nature when the latter shows its frightful might, a case in which nature might be said to exhibit its “terrorist” face—a case of “physical terrorism,” so to speak. In addition, the subjective feeling of the beautiful and the disinterestedness connected with it might well be applied to instances from real life. For those reasons it is worth re-contextualizing Kant’s treatment of beauty and morality to fit such contemporary phenomena as global terrorism.

Morality, for Kant, constitutes a problematic notion when it comes to an individual’s appreciation of an object, to the extent that it poses a question of interest or personal condition, that is, a question of a deep-seated prejudice that blurs the subject’s view leading her to concentrate not on the specific object of beauty but on all the things around that object. That, however, represents an unethical stance as it allows one to think of the object of beauty through the perspective of determinant judgment only, which imposes restrictions on individual taste, thus making human behaviour radically unfree. In Section Two of *The Critique of Judgment* Kant provides us with the following example:

If anyone asks me whether I consider that the palace I see before me is beautiful I may, perhaps, reply that I do not care for things of that sort that are merely made to be gaped at. . . . All one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the real existence of the object of this representation. . . . Everyone must allow that a judgment of the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. (6)

Kant draws our attention to the fact that there is a deep heterogeneity between visual compulsion, which is interest-free, and reason. Whereas reason has to do with the common laws of understanding based on predetermined moral rules, visual attraction, springing from feeling and imagination, bears on more authentic rules grounded on an aesthetic and independent judgment that judges what it sees at any moment rather than stops to think

before judging. Thus, on the one hand, when we bear witness to a disaster, reason dictates that we feel sympathy for the victims while raging against those responsible for it. On the other hand, we are unknowingly captivated by an ineffable feeling of awe and secret pleasure that we've finally got the chance to witness something unprecedented. And that is neither natural nor reasonable. It signifies, rather, the emergence of a forbidden aesthetic deprived of logic or morality. Such a forbidden aesthetic is the key to thinking of the 9/11 disaster as visually captivating. A passenger plane crashing into a WTC skyscraper is something we have never witnessed before. Therefore we cannot associate it with an already established law of reasoning so as to be able to conceptualize it. Its aesthetic power derives from its autonomy, its non-dependence on any known category of perception.

Beauty, according to Kant, situates itself in the realm of non-conceptual imagination. The Kantian conception of real beauty capitalizes on the *immediate* as well as *peculiar* or *uncanny* pleasure produced by an object or aesthetic experience. The pleasure deriving from an aesthetic appreciation of beauty is characterized as immediate because it is unmediated by any concepts, moral interests or rational ends. In addition, such a pleasure is seen as uncanny as it is extraneous to any cognitive or epistemological function of the mind: “The only reason why an object is called beautiful is that its representation immediately produces a peculiar pleasure in the subject” (*CJ*, 6). It is this peculiar or uncanny pleasure that interests me with regard to appreciating either art or experience. More particularly, since reason and morality do not allow for an engagement with life or art that is based mostly upon sensibility, there seems to emerge an alternative aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic that centers precisely upon the morally forbidden—thus, socially unacceptable—feeling of pleasure generated when a subject appreciates aesthetically, or reflects upon the very form of, a certain object or view that by “normal” standards cannot be thought of as moral or lawful.

Forbidden Pleasures and Artistic Representations

Aesthetic appreciation, in a forbidden or disinterested sense, and art become imperative when it comes to addressing man-made catastrophe or terrorism. It was a political as well as historical treatment of the 9/11 terrorist incident that the American photographer Joel Meyerowitz had in mind when he requested, and was finally granted, unlimited access to Ground Zero in order to visually capture the horror associated with the scene of trauma. Twenty-seven of those photographs were singled out for an international exhibition called “After September 11: Images from Ground Zero.” The exhibition’s intention was to communicate to the world the immense dimensions of the tragedy, but more importantly, to appeal to the human psyche and emotion through the use of non-linguistic and non-rational means.

Even though Meyerowitz's aim allegedly was just to preserve the memory of horror by bearing witness to the debris and the morbid reality of the site, he seems to have done much more than that. He takes to an aesthetic appreciation of what he has witnessed and photographed. In an interview he makes the following ambivalent statement: "It's not perverse, I think, to focus not on the horror but to marvel at what's here. Look at how that building stood up! Is this not astonishingly beautiful? ... You make judgments that are, dare I say, aesthetic ones. I'm walking a fine line between art and documentary" (Kahn 2001, C1). Meyerowitz finds it too hard not to acknowledge the uncanny beauty of such a spectacular scene. He is unconsciously affected by beauty as that radicality which generates an immediate and peculiar pleasure grounded upon no epistemological or moral reason whatsoever. However, it is safe to say that his pictures, by aesthetically framing the horrifying reality and thereby keeping the wounds open for everyone to look at, contribute to an *ethical* treatment of the event through an empowerment of sensibility to radical photography. As another critic very pointedly argued, "... in the end, it might be beauty that a Ground Zero memorial most seriously needed," quickly adding that by "beauty" he means "an aesthetic experience that emotionally moves a beholder, an affective response that takes us beyond ourselves into new (and often unexpected) positions of being and feeling" (Zuber 2006, 296).

When it comes to a serious engagement with terrorism, denouncing aesthetics is a *moral* but not necessarily *ethical* act. According to moral law in Hillis Miller's sense, it's only fair to denounce the cruelty of the terrorist attack and subsequently abstain from discussing the event and reproducing its images. Ethics, though, picks up where morality leaves off. An ethical stance is sincere enough to open up the issue of the importance of aesthetics in discussing the real. More particularly, it reveals to us that in order to preserve the memory of atrocity, thereby keeping atrocity from repeating itself, we have to retrieve emotion and sensibility, which, in turn, will lead us to place more emphasis on the non-rationality of terror. Without activating sensibility we are inevitably resorting to logic and reason, in which case we end up rationalizing an event, thereby undermining its significance in the long run. In this light, to present a "tricky" and "interesting" art of the real seems ethical as it exploits positively the work of the senses in order to produce a truthful and accurate picture of the horrific reality.

But how can we dwell on horrific experience long enough to avoid rationalizing or putting it in a logical frame? The answer is, via reflecting persistently on the terrorizing images themselves. Image, as Heidegger has it, is pre-conceptual, revealing much more than concept does.⁵ Whereas concept employs rational language and conventional methodologies to describe from a distance an event or phenomenon, fictional or not, image derives from the power of imagination to evoke dream-like visual events that precede

conscious language. The unexpected image of the WTC plane crash is fully aligned with the dream-work and the pre-conceptual associations contrived by imagination as an entity which is forbidden in the world of concept and rationality. It is the pre-conceptual nature of imagination that renders it “forbidden,” in the sense that an image that is devoid of concept is too difficult to manipulate.

Aesthetic appreciation of beauty and reflective judgment emphasize the role of disinterestedness in assessing an object. In effect, not only humane and benign but also inhumane and malignant *non-art* representations or objects could be considered aesthetically attractive because stark reality will never attempt to flatter our vanity. Arnold Berleant has posited that experiences of the aesthetic “include not only the elevated and noble but the reprehensible, degrading, and destructive” as well (2009). Following that pattern, we may assume that an original aesthetic experience generates ever new versions of the strangely appealing and fascinating (and potentially the feeling of the beautiful) to the extent that it involves the element of surprise or shock which activates our imagination. According to Edmund Burke, as we have seen, such experiences captivate the soul before the understanding is ready to join with them or oppose them.⁶

The original aesthetic experience that millions of people had by watching live the terrorist attack of September 11 verged on a feeling that was unprecedented and morally forbidden. Before the astounded spectators could comprehend rationally what was going on, their imagination was for a moment free to wander around uninhibited in mental places that they had hardly visualised or sensed in the past. They were witnessing the a-moral face of uncensored beauty through an unconscious espousal of an aesthetic, rather than determinant, judgment of the scene. In Kant’s view, the aesthetic is at work when the imagination is unrestrained by any predetermined rule so that free play between imagination and understanding occurs and a feeling of pleasure arises as a result. Still, wouldn’t such a free play operate also with an “ugly” artwork or aesthetic experience, such as that of terrorism?

Aestheticizing Hiroshima and Nuclear Terrorism

The forbidden and disinterested aesthetics that I am proposing shows itself also in another major catastrophe of the twentieth century, namely the Hiroshima/Nagasaki nuclear bombing in 1945. Osama Bin Laden, himself, called the September 11 attack a “Hiroshima in America” (Ukai 2005, 245). That was a playful aphorism that would classify openly the Hiroshima bombing under the category of spectacular massive terrorism, both in outcome and intention. According to recent criticism, “Hiroshima realizes the qualitatively new potential for genocidal destruction inherent in the project of modernist science itself. . . .

[T]he all-too-real doomsday weapon—the so-called weapon of mass destruction or WMD—set the new standards for terror and sublimity” (Ray, 2008).

To speak of and represent Hiroshima in horror is nothing new, and we will justifiably keep doing so in the future. Let us, though, take a look at an alternative view of the Hiroshima event shortly after the bomb was dropped: “Navy Day, October 1945, a crowd of 120,000 gather in the Los Angeles Coliseum to celebrate a simulated re-enactment of the Bombing of Hiroshima, complete with a mushroom cloud that rises from the fifty yard line to the joyful cheers of that rapt throng” (Boyer, 1985, 181). Two months after the terrifying incident, people in America were celebrating the decisiveness of the strike and its unprecedented spectacularity in the shape of a magnificent mushroom, a phallic symbol of awesome power and sexual conquest. The people, that is, were exulting over the beautiful spectacle created by a strange new weapon that helped them win the war. That thousands of the (non-combatant) inhabitants of a city chosen at random were evaporated in a single instant was, at least momentarily, of secondary importance, compared to the exhilaration felt at such a beautiful and symbol-laden sight.

Although the nuclear attack was not televisually accessible to the general public (still, it was caught on tape), it was imprinted on people’s minds through the occurrence of an extremely unfamiliar but mesmerizing visual event, the rise of the mushroom cloud—a rather benign symbol of creation—leading them to appreciate aesthetically the distant apocalypse of a nation—the Japanese—that “had it coming.” There is no doubt that what sincerely remains of that instance of global terrorism, the palpable evidence of it sticking to our minds forever, is the visual proof not of the mass killing and total destruction but of the mushroom cloud arising as a result. The dropping of the bomb was repressed and replaced by the fully aesthetic image of the mushroom cloud, a flawless image signifying a flawless attack, the “perfect ending” of a world conflict.

The Aesthetics of Science: Seeing Beauty in the Nuclear Image

The aesthetic power of the bomb and a taste of its unprecedented potential for destruction had already been experienced first-hand by the Los Alamos scientists in New Mexico during the first successful test of the bomb on 16 July 1945, less than a month from its *real* use on *real* enemy ground. For those scientists—notably, Drs. Szilard, Teller, Oppenheimer, Bohr, Meitner and Neumann—the entire experience was surreal and fully aesthetic, in the sense that they had to use all their senses to capture its utter destructiveness. More particularly, one scientist described it as “the biggest light I have ever seen or that I think anyone has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you. It was a vision which was seen with more than the eye. It was seen to last for ever” (Rhodes 1986, 672). Robert Oppenheimer simply gave an account of the blast’s uncanny effect on the

witnesses: “We waited until the blast had passed, walked out of the shelter and then it was extremely solemn. We knew the world would not be the same. . . . Most people were silent” (Rhodes 676).

The rather poetic, abstract, and deeply ritualistic experience described by Oppenheimer bears on a Kantian take on the dynamic sublime as a quasi-physical feeling of awe that is eventually contained by the rationalizing process of the mind which dictates that human intellect will finally prevail. Oppenheimer was not physically touched by the explosion. Other workers and scientists were more directly exposed to the ruthless force of the atomic blast: some went blind for a few seconds, others were knocked off their feet. Those people experienced, in a way, the Burkean feeling of primitive terror evoked by the elimination of the distance between the terrifying object and the observer. Both groups, however, got a glimpse, even for an infinitesimal moment, of an unprecedented view that engaged all five senses in a spectacular—and indeed beautiful—image or spectacle. Surprisingly, the witnesses felt that the more beautiful the spectacle, the more successful the test.

Inexplicable beauty as pre-conceptual image takes over the minds of the nuclear scientists at work on the project of nuclear fission—the so-called “Manhattan Project.” It turns out that the otherwise utterly positivist scientists need to take to the faculty of artistic imagination to be able to absorb and comprehend the wonders performed by the atom and electrons before their astonished faces:

Even the most brilliant scientists at moments expressed astonishment at the intangible, uncertain realm in which the familiar laws of gravity, mass, and motion did not apply; some even believed that language itself could not capture the atom’s essential weirdness. To the extent that the atomic scientists were able to describe and interpret their bizarre subject, they had to exercise a faculty more often associated with artists than with people such as themselves—the imagination. Indeed, the deeper the scientists probed, the greater the need to conjure unexpected, fantastical, wondrous things. . . . (Fiege 2007, 590).

The scientists/artists could not but feel the need to “conjure unexpected, fantastical, wondrous things” in their desperate attempt to render their analyses more scientific and objective, since they were aware that purely scientific language and rational reflection were not capable of illustrating accurately the bizarre processes at hand. Thus, the wondrous as “wonderful” as well as “fantastic” gradually became the main focus of their study. Paradoxically, the more accurate, realistic, and to-the-point their scientific accounts, the more artistic and imagination-driven their conclusions. The Los Alamos scientists feel exhilarated at the absolutely uncanny view of familiar elements behaving in an unexpected,

hence unfamiliar way, thereby producing radical beauty as the wonderfully authentic experience of newness. For Kant, beauty is already a radical notion or experience insofar as it inhabits an imaginative place that is *other* than the place that we conventionally inhabit, namely, the realm of concept and reason. The nuclear physicists have gone beyond that familiar and conventional realm, getting a taste of authentic, unprecedented and pre-conceptual beauty.

One cannot emphasize enough the importance of empowering aesthetics (as *aesthesis*) rather than positivist and scientific language in the discourse of nuclear science. More significantly, one cannot overlook how the image of radical beauty haunts the narrative and thoughts of the nuclear physicists themselves: “‘My God, it’s beautiful,’ blurted an assistant to Julian Mack (1903-1966),” “the test was ‘wonderful,’ said David Inglis,” while Victor Weisskopf “recalled that ‘an aureole of bluish light’ around the fireball reminded him of a medieval painting of Jesus ascending to heaven in a bright yellow sphere surrounded by a blue halo” (Fiege 601). The spontaneous reaction at the unbelievable sight of the explosion was uncannily aesthetic, by way of pointing to a beautiful rather than appalling aspect of the mushroom cloud. The image of the bomb even takes on artistic dimensions by being associated with a medieval painting, which raises the question of whether the nuclear bomb is felt to be a work of art—hence, creative rather than destructive—or not; what is more, the image itself is not associated with just any randomly chosen pictorial artwork but specifically with the resurrected figure of Christ ascending to heaven, which naturally clothes the event in a religious and fully Christian attire. Apparently, the image of the bomb (and the bomb itself) is thought to demonstrate a benign and inherently “good” nature rather than a malignant, satanic forcefulness.

The Ethics of the Aesthetics of Destruction

But how moral are we to identify an infinitely destructive weapon, the embodiment of utter destruction, with something aesthetically beautiful or even artistic? Aren’t the Los Alamos scientists exhibiting insensitive or irresponsible behaviour by not focusing exclusively upon the atrocious effects of their creation on the future of mankind? The invocation of beauty and the acknowledgement of the bomb’s dehumanizing consequences in the same breath are not necessarily in contradistinction with each other. The scientists’ attitude cannot be viewed through the lens of traditional morality, insofar as it appears to be founded upon aesthetic rather than moral appreciation. The Los Alamos Scientists assess what they are witnessing from the standpoint of reflective (aesthetic), not determinant, judgment. Their judgment, that is, hinges upon a disinterested response at the sight of the mushroom cloud, a response which is based upon *a posteriori* assessment. In other words, they are only responding spontaneously to the overwhelming picture that is drawn before their eyes. At the very moment of the explosion, they are not preoccupied with the *moral*

implications or consequences of the nuclear event because that would virtually call attention to something extraneous to the event itself.

Paying close attention, through aesthetic judgment, to the spectacularity of the bomb and the ensuing mushroom cloud allows the scientists/witnesses to assess more accurately the magnitude of the destructive event and understand more deeply—less through cognition, more through imagination—the reality and function of the nucleus whose unfamiliarly erratic behavior can be described effectively through non-scientific language. At the same time, to witness aesthetically, as well as wonder at, the overpowering images of the nuclear effects is to retain deeply in one's memory the picture of utter destructiveness effected by the bomb on a physical, emotional and psychological level, which is undeniably an ethical act insofar as it is only through the preservation of the memory (or the image) of nuclear destruction that a more ethically involved and responsible use of nuclear power can be realized.

Peggy Rosenthal touches upon the importance of the visual presence of the bomb for the consolidation of an ethically sound attitude towards nuclear weapons by reminding us that at the time of the Aboveground Test Ban (1962-63) Los Alamos former director Harold Agnew had allegedly recommended that “the treaty contain a provision for world leaders to gather once a year to watch an aboveground nuclear test, so that they'd see what awful power they had in their hands and hence wouldn't be tempted to use it” (1991, 89). What Agnew meant was that humans—both scientists and laymen, world leaders and common people—need to experience first-hand nuclear power once in a while, so that they remain absolutely certain about the deterrence imperative: campaigning against the generalized use of nuclear power as weapon of mass destruction. Humans need to *see* in order to believe. As Rosenthal argues, “the mushroom-cloud symbol has perhaps been serving a comparable deterrent purpose for the general culture. . . . It keeps its powerful meanings dramatically before us and so sustains our collective sense of urgency about them” (89).

To bear witness to such an iconic image in the context of securing an ethical treatment of nuclear power and vision involves the unconscious act of aestheticizing the forbidden icon/image by means of reflective judgment. Brigadier General Thomas Farrell's account of the first Trinity Test at Los Alamos—one of the first written accounts of the event—discloses an unprecedented aesthetics of beauty lurking behind the “big bang” of the nuclear blast:

The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many

times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violent, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. . . . (Rosenthal, 79-80)

One could hardly have expected from a General to produce such a purely literary description. Farrell refers to beautiful colors, lighting effects, mountain ranges lit by multiple suns as if he were trying to make the case that when the dramatic demonstration of utter destruction reaches its peak, it manages to cross over to the realm of artistic beauty. The unnatural images allegedly evoke in Farrell's mind pictures that the most ingenious painters of the world were burned to draw but never did; beauties that the greatest poets proved too petty to describe. It seems paradoxical that in order to give an objective account of the most sophisticated scientific breakthrough man has ever known, one has to reconnect with one's own sensibilities by resorting to feeling, the faculty of imagination and the world of poetry. Still, it is not paradoxical at all if we consider the possibility that real (authentic) beauty enters only at the very moment that reason and cognition exit, which probably suggests that to describe the indescribable accurately you have to let go of your cognitive and conceptual faculties: ironically, to be truly objective you have to stop being objective.

But what does that "tremendous" "man-made phenomenon" have to do with poets and their dreams? Are the nuclear blast and its visual by-products art? Are we watching authentic art in the making? The blast, along with its enticingly unfolding optic illusions, is definitely not art even though we frequently discuss a non-art object as if it were artistic in order to emphasize its visual powerfulness. However, something can be visually captivating without being (seen as) art. What feels art-like is the indubitable aesthetic experience usually connected with an attractive or spectacular view, in this case, the specific terrorizing incident. In order to do justice to the overwhelming phenomenon that he is witnessing, Farrell is compelled to activate his sensory power, in other words to engage in an aesthetic, rather than cognitive or moral, appreciation of the event. More particularly, he has to engage in an appreciation of the sheer beauty of the event. This kind of appreciation can be very well likened to the appreciation that Damien Hirst had of the entire "spectacle" of 9/11; it is also very similar to Stockhausen's admiration for the supposedly flawless "performance" mounted in front of millions of spectators.

Even though Farrell is not an artist like Hirst or Stockhausen, he still feels the need to resort to aesthetics in order to comprehend his very own experience. His approach is aesthetic to the extent that his mind has become absorbed by the sheer image and feeling of the explosion, and thus, for a moment, he cannot afford to be preoccupied with the moral dimension of nuclear power and its destructive impact upon humanity. In other words, by

being overwhelmed by the “now-ness” of the unprecedented event he cannot afford to look “before” or “after” the enthralling image or spectacle, that is, for instance, to look at the inherently dehumanizing principles and precepts underlying the use of nuclear technology or at the terrifying consequences of using it. Farrell further complicates his account of the unanticipated scene/image by mentioning also the emergence of a “beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined.”

The beauty that Farrell is talking about seems to be unable to fit in with the model of beauty with which we are already familiar: it goes beyond the common or commonplace and that is why it cannot possibly be put into specific words. We have already referred to how the General conflates the beauty of the aesthetic experience at hand with artistic beauty. In other words, he feels the element of authenticity in the spectacle of the nuclear blast, both, as a captivating aesthetic experience and as a new, groundbreaking and astonishing artwork. Yet, isn't art supposed to be fictitious and artificial by nature?

For radical artists, great art might have to go beyond the fictional and the artificial by flirting openly with reality itself. What is extraordinarily implied in Farrell's statement is that not only does the truly authentic beauty of the nuclear mushroom cloud subvert our common assumptions/rules about what “beautiful” means, namely an aesthetic object which is harmlessly admired, but it also transgresses the basic law according to which art should remain a fictional representation rather than engage actively with the individual in the real world. As soon as the nuclear bomb went off for the first time, it produced uncanny, art-like images that exceeded known reality. This was the point at which art stopped being mere representation and entered the domain of the ruthlessly real—the “thing itself.” In the final analysis, the gruesome nuclear reality is not to be marked off from the world of aesthetic reflection and artistic representation.

In this essay, I demonstrated that an aesthetics of *beauty* is implicated in witnessing spectacular images of large-scale catastrophes. Furthermore, acknowledging the aesthetic appeal of such images is an act of individual freedom. In this sense, it is also an ethical act.

Notes

1. See, Paul de Man, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” pp. 121-44, and Jean Francois Lyotard, “Acinema.”
2. See Scarry, 2001.
3. Arnold Berleant talks about “a peculiar fascination that the public has with such events of world theatre,” events, though, that he would prefer to classify as “sublime.” See Arnold Berleant, 2009.

4. See Damien Hirst, 2002; Karlheinz Stockhausen, 2001.

5. See Martin Heidegger, pp. 175-179.

6. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 107-108. For Burke, both the sublime and the beautiful catch us off guard by striking without any preparation.

Works Cited:

Alvaro, Constanza del Rio, and Francisco Collado Rodriguez. "On Literature and Ethics: An Interview with J. Hillis Miller." *Interview. The European English Messenger* 15.1 (2006): 23-34. Print.

Berleant, Arnold. "Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 7 (2009). Web. 5 Jan. 2014.

Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

Boyer, Paul. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. Print.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Ed. James T. Boulton (1958). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986. Print.

de Man, Paul. "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant." *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*. Ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. Print.

Fiege, Mark. "The Atomic Scientists, the Sense of Wonder, and the Bomb." *Environmental History* 12.3 (2007): 578-613. Print.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and William Richardson. New York: Basic, 1962. Print.

Hirst, Damien. Interview. *BBC News Online*, 11 September 2002.

Kahn, Joseph. "Afterimages: Joel Meyerowitz's photos find beauty beneath the horror of September 11." *Boston Globe*. 24 October 2001. C1. Print.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952. Print.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. "Acinema." Trans. Paisley N. Livingston. *The Lyotard Reader*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. Print.

Nuzzo, Angelica. "Kant and Herder on Baumgarten's Aesthetica." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.4 (2006): 577-597. Print.

Ray, Gene. "History, the Sublime, Terror. Notes on the Politics of Fear." Ed. Seamus Kealy. *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*. Blackwood Gallery/Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008. Print.

Redfield, Marc. "Virtual Trauma. The Idiom of 9/11." *Diacritics* 37.1 (2007): 55-80. Print.

Rhodes, Richard. *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986. Print.

Rosenthal, Peggy. "The Mushroom Cloud as Cultural Image." *American Literary History* 3.1 (1991): 63-92. Print.

Satoshi Ukai, Satoshi. "The Road to Hell is paved with Good Intentions: For a 'Critique of Terrorism' to Come." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13.1 (2005): 235-252. Print.

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Print.

Stockhausen, Karlheinz. "Attacks Called Great Art." *New York Times*. September 19, 2001.

Zuber, Devin. "Flanerie at Ground Zero: Aesthetic Counter-memories in Lower Manhattan." *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006): 269-299. Print.