

STORIES WITH PICTURES: NARRATIVES, ICONS, AND ABSOLUTES

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Oftentimes, the way that a story is told can be more influential than its content. In his essay "Hammer," Harvey Blume explores and expands upon this notion and the dangerous implications that it can have on the way we conceive of the present and the future. Specifically, Blume seeks to describe and critique a prevailing method of storytelling that he calls "narrative fundamentalism," a method by which the events of the past are presented in their simplest form by "cut[ting] through complications, irony, self-reflection . . . to give the sensation of raw truth, undoctored experience" (91). To illustrate this method, Blume draws on Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*—which, according to Blume's interpretation, presents the story of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as devoid of controversy. Gibson's *Passion* suggests that "certainty is accessible and doubt can be once and for all expunged" through the telling of one absolute, final version of this tale. By refusing to acknowledge that "[d]oubts and complexities may gather around [his source material]," Gibson's storytelling wipes the controversy from existence (92). To his audience, the difference between the *event* and the *story* becomes nonexistent; we are left with one simple truth extracted from the simplest version of the past.

Blume's critique is developed by looking at this type of storytelling through a lens that—at first glance—seems totally unrelated to the religious conviction that underlies Gibson's *Passion*: the genre of reality television. Blume argues that the genre is rooted firmly in the notion that truth can be obtained through a process of stripping down the complexity of a narrative. The producers of reality television shows like Mark Burnett, the executive producer of *Survivor*, purport to present "the world itself, in concentrated, volatile form" in their creations (93). The difference between our responses to these two attempts at presenting simple truths by way of simple narratives is that, in the case of reality television, "we all know a show is a show" (95).

Blume argues that we recognize that the “reality” of reality television is fluid, and that the editors of the shows have selected which “stories behind the story” will be the most entertaining and interesting (95). In this way, the equally fundamental *storytelling* of reality television does not create the same sensation of fundamental *truth* that Gibson seems to achieve in *The Passion of the Christ*.

What is unsettling to Blume is that we do not recognize the similarity between these two ways of telling a story. We fail to see that the canonical narratives of religion and ideology ignore conflicting evidence that has been “scrubbed out of the official account” and leaves nothing but the powerful simplicity of the “Ordeal and the Survivor who lives through it” (95). Writing at a time when ideological fundamentalism led to the justification of atrocious acts like the torture of prisoners at camps like Abu Ghraib (and the terrorist acts which incited the hysteria that eventually led to these prisoners’ torture), Blume sees this myopic use of storytelling as especially dangerous and problematic.

Another essayist interested in the power of absolutist storytelling, John Berger, ponders another act of “justified” atrocity—the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan at the end of World War II—in his essay “Hiroshima.” Berger, after being faced with several startling first-hand accounts (in the form of drawings and paintings) of the post-bombing devastation in Hiroshima, cannot accept that we have attempted to justify the event in the half-century since its occurrence. To Berger, the images in the drawings and paintings—“traced memories”—from the aftermath of Hiroshima are most unsettling because between them and “the numerous representations of hell in European medieval art, there is a very close affinity” (86). In Berger’s mind the aftermath of Hiroshima was a veritable hell on earth—an absolute moral evil. The justification for it has been lodged in a “systematic, slow and thorough process of suppression and elimination” that has traded the physical and moral reality of the bombing for one contingent upon political and military calculation (87). While Berger recognizes the realities of a military, he argues that “what has to be redeemed, reinserted, dislocated and never be allowed to be forgotten, is the other reality”: the moral reality (87). If we don’t remember it, we slip into the dangerous and destructive practice of relativizing and justifying evil.

Here we have an interesting point of discussion between Blume and Berger. While Berger is clearly arguing for a more inclusive use of the perspectives from which the bombing can be analyzed and a repudiation of the West's canonical narrative of the event, he also seems to be arguing for the acceptance of a different, more painful absolute—that the American people perpetrated an unequivocally evil act on the Japanese in August 1945. Looking from the perspective of Blume's "Hammer," one is forced to ask if telling the story of Hiroshima as one of absolute evil—as opposed to one that justifies the action by willfully excluding moral realities—is also a dangerous form of narrative fundamentalism. Berger ends his essay with the definitive statement that the events of August 6, 1945 "can *never* be justified" (emphasis added 89). This seems to directly challenge Blume's call to consider multiple perspectives; Berger is claiming that it is simply a matter of determining the angle that provides the most compelling view of an event.

Of interest in the debate as well is Berger's focus on the physical reality of the event. Berger couches his argument in the indisputable nature of feelings of horror evinced by the hellish *images* of Hiroshima after the bombing (88). Blume, in his essay, describes exactly this sort of appeal as a facet of narrative fundamentalism when he observes that *Survivor* and *The Passion of the Christ* "place enormous emphasis on the power of ordeal to seal their pact with reality" (91). Blume argues that the presentation of shocking and dangerous trials undergone by the protagonists of these and other stories cause audiences to accept them as legitimate and incontestably true (92). One could argue that just as *The Passion of the Christ* utilizes images of intense struggle and discomfort to elevate Gibson's perspective to the position of absolute truth, Berger appeals to the ordeals endured by the Japanese victims of the bombing to further his own absolutist perspective.

Blume himself seems to view the torture of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib as an absolute evil also justified by an absolutist narrative. At the end of his essay, he references a photograph of a hooded prisoner "standing on a box, wires fastened to his outstretched arms and genitals" (96). Like Berger, Blume uses the horrific nature of an image to substantiate his arguments about narrative fundamentalism. Perhaps Blume is merely furthering his point about the persuasiveness of rigorous ordeals. Perhaps he would argue that the ordeal presented in the photograph is not as manipulative, since—

through the power of photography—it is presented without any of the intermediate editing of storytellers like Mel Gibson and Mark Burnett.

It is also useful to view the persuasiveness of these images as not being rooted in the power of ordeal alone, but as drawing on another ancient inclination: the power of the icon. In both Berger's and Blume's texts, the images that are referenced are both religious in nature—Berger likens the images of Hiroshima to hell (86), while Blume ends his essay by labeling the aforementioned scene of torture a "crucifixion" (96). Certain images, especially those tied to religion, contain so much potential for creating instantaneous mental connections that they transcend their explicit meanings and become icons—images that are automatically charged with absolute implicit meanings. Blume undoubtedly knew the power of the icon when he inserted the crucifix into his essay. Yet, one could be convinced that his doing so was counterproductive or even hypocritical, as it evokes a sense of *absolute* evil of the type described by Berger in "Hiroshima." Perhaps the only way to understand the subtle reality of Blume's invoking this icon as a counter to absolutism is to seek a different perspective by turning Blume's own iconography—quite literally—on its head.

By inverting Blume's crucifix, one comes to another icon that may hold part of the key to ameliorating the complications of the Blume-Berger conversation. This image is of a man suspended upside down from a tree. His torso forms a cross, and around his head is a crown of light. He is The Hanged Man, the twelfth card of the Tarot—a deck of cards bearing images with mystic implications that date back to pre-Christian Europe and beyond. According to Arthur Waite, the compiler of the most popular modern Tarot deck, the cards of the Tarot tell a story of a man on a journey from ignorance to oneness with the universe. The Hanged Man represents this individual in the center of his journey, whereupon, after enduring the trials of life, he recognizes the limitations of his physical form and suspends himself from the World Tree in hopes of attaining a form of enlightenment by changing his view of the world. Eventually, he dies, leaving the physical world behind. The halo enshrining The Hanged Man's head can be interpreted both as a symbol of the knowledge attained from his ordeal and as a sign of his martyrdom—his self-sacrifice in the name of a higher truth. The card is often interpreted to signify the importance of considering multiple perspectives as well as the

onerous nature of enlightenment (Waite 64). Even more interesting is the fact that, when revealed upside-down during a Tarot reading, The Hanged Man's meaning is inverted as well. The new icon, which looks curiously like a martyr on a crucifix, comes to represent the dangers of being trapped in one mindset or point of view.

Perhaps the act of inverting the icon of the crucifix was Blume's motive all along. The "crucifixion" of the Abu Ghraib prisoner might be far from an absolutist argument about evil and instead be a biting indictment of the icon of the crucifix itself. Meant to symbolize one sacrifice to end all suffering, the crucifix, here, comes to represent an absolutist narrative that begets more suffering. Perhaps Blume is arguing that it is time for the absolutist allure of this icon to be abandoned once and for all for its more open-minded twin brother on the twelfth card of the Rider-Waite Tarot Deck. This way, Blume's theoretical inversion of the icon comes into perfect harmony with the physical inversion I have proposed.

But where does this leave Berger's argument about absolute evil? It does not seem that his concerns have been entirely refuted by further exploration of Blume's call for perspective. The insight of The Hanged Man comes once more into play to demonstrate that the discrepancy between Blume and Berger may not be as stark as I previously posited. To argue for the existence of absolute evil is not necessarily in complete conflict with Blume's conclusion about narrative fundamentalism, because Blume's conclusion is not necessarily relativistic. If Blume believed that there was no objective truth to be discovered, he would have no reason to suggest that narrative fundamentalism is detrimental, because the conclusions created by this type of storytelling would be equally as valid as the conclusions of any other narrative. Instead, Blume, like The Hanged Man, is intimating the existence of a truth beyond our superficial examination of the past and present. It is a truth that requires intellectual rigor and a broadening of perspective instead of simplification and myopia.

In the essay "My Intellectual Path," British philosopher Isaiah Berlin describes this line of thinking exactly. His philosophy, which he calls "pluralism," is neither "monism (only one set of values is true, all the others are false) . . . [nor] relativism (my values are mine, yours are yours, and if we clash, too bad, neither of us can claim to be right)" (11, 13). Rather, Berlin

recognizes that the pursuit of values is a human endeavor that must be based in objective logic. Different value systems must be placed in dialogue with one another, reaching towards a more complete understanding of the truth than either system could attain on its own. Through this philosophy, we may find our answer to how fully Berger's arguments can coexist with Blume's, despite their initial appearance of being in conflict. At the heart of "Hiroshima" is the call for reinstating the moral and physical dimensions of the bombing into the story of August 6, 1945. "Hammer" warns against making the "evil" of any event into a narrative absolute, calling for, instead, a pluralistic view. A pluralistic view of events and arguments would welcome alternative perspectives as a necessary means for unraveling the truth hidden in layers of recounted stories. In this way, Berger would be totally justified, in Blume's view, in contending that the moral perspective is more compelling than the military perspective—so long as both angles are given a fair chance to make their respective cases. In the end, Berger's most compelling argument is his call to abandon relativism, while Blume's most compelling argument is his call to abandon absolutes. After this thorough analysis, it is now clear that these arguments are not in conflict, but rather combine to form a conclusion harmonious with Berlin's.

In order to get as close as we possibly can to the truth, it is necessary to stop hoping to tell one story that gives the totality of an event. Instead, it is important that we embrace the power found in a plurality of perspectives. We ought to take the example of *The Hanged Man*, and invert our stories so that we can see more clearly which seem to ring most true, and which have ignored important details that can only be seen by way of a different perspective. Then, once we are done hanging upside-down, we can examine our new story and continue our intellectual ordeal. If we are ever to improve our understanding of the infinitely complicated past and present, then we must accept the truth that Blume, Berger, and Berlin are all hinting at in different ways: that no single story is the whole story, no icon the universal truth. As human beings with two eyes, we view everything from two perspectives at all times—our brains automatically reconcile these different images into a single one, which assumes an added layer of depth as a result of our binocular vision. It is precisely this depth perception in storytelling which the constant process of narrative inversion allows, creating a view of events that is dynamic,

sophisticated, and fully rendered. The views from the top of the cross at Golgotha and the bottom of the World Tree must both be accepted as pieces of the same picture, or else our stories will be doomed to lack their true depth.

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