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IPM Essay

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The Interpretation of Destroyed Objects

A Case Study of Two Bus Wrecks

1 Introduction

Certain violent acts, be they deliberate or accidental, occupy our attention more than others. The same may be said of certain objects that are created in an act of violence. Indeed, it may be the case that such objects are more potent in the way that they hold our imaginations in thrall than the thought of the events that brought them about, which by definition are fleeting and apprehensible only by means of the traces they leave on the objects that are left behind. This essay treats one such object-type, the destroyed bus, and offers some reasons for the fascination that it can have for us. In other words, I mean to treat the destroyed bus as a cultural symptom in the sense that Jacques Lacan intends when he accredits Marx and Freud with having invented the symptom.

This theoretical approach needs clarification, and I use Slavoj Žižek's treatment of Lacan's assertion in the opening of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to do so. For Žižek, Marx and Freud understood that the symptom is not *simply* a form behind which secret

content is hidden. So when Marx identifies the commodity-form as the central symptom that helps us gain an understanding of capitalist ideology, he does not mean that there is a 'hidden kernel' of truth inherent in the commodity. For Marx, the secret is in the form of the commodity itself and the work that needs to be done is in examining the process by which concealed content assumes the form that it does. The same applies to Freud's approach to dreams; even after we have explained a hidden meaning in a given dream, the dream itself remains an enigmatic phenomenon and the question of why the dream has taken the form that it has remains unanswered. For Žižek, the process by which a hidden meaning disguises itself in a given form is, or should be, the real object of enquiry.

The aim of this essay is not simply to select certain instances of damaged buses and ask what hidden meaning they stand for, rather the task is to ask why any hidden meaning that they contain manifests itself in the form of a bus. What secret, if any, does the form of the bus hold that makes it so potent when it is subjected to violence? And is there a particular potency inherent in the destroyed bus as an object, rather than as something merely reported to us?

The intention in asking these questions is to test the usefulness of the object as a means of describing the world beyond itself. This is an important issue for the museum, an institution that may be narrowly defined as one that endows particular objects with particular significance in the belief that they are in some way informative of the world that exists outside the walls of the museum.

2 Descriptions

This essay is centred on two instances of buses that undergo shocking violence. I describe them here.

2a Description: Bus 19

Bus 19 is the wreckage of a Jerusalem city bus that was bombed in a suicide attack on 29 January 2004. The bomber, a member of the Palestinian security services, killed himself and 11 others and injured around 50. In March 2004, the burnt-out wreck of the bus was brought by orthodox Jewish groups in Israel and the Netherlands to the forecourt of the International Court of Justice at The Hague at the opening of a case brought against the Israeli state for the construction of the so-called security barrier. Israel justified the building of the barrier on the grounds that it would protect its citizens against attacks such as that on Bus 19. The court eventually decided that the wall was illegal except where it followed the Green Line (the de facto border established by Israel in the war of 1967). The judgement ruled that all the sectors built inside the Occupied Territories violated international law as well as conventions and agreements signed by Israel. In late 2004 and throughout 2005 the bus was sent to a number of US cities in a travelling exhibition organised and funded by an Israeli Orthodox Jewish organisation and by a US Christian group, with the aim of helping "Americans visualize the terror that Israelis face on a daily basis and to heighten the conscience [sic] in regards to terror."



Figure 1 Bus 19 on a flatbed truck trailer on its US tour

2b Description: *The Sweet Hereafter*

The Sweet Hereafter (1997) is a feature film, directed by Canadian Atom Egoyan, based on the novel of the same name by Russell Banks. The plot develops in a non-chronological fashion, with frequent overlaps between flashbacks and flashforwards, and between internal memories and narrated testimony. The following is a chronological description of the plot: A school bus crashes into a frozen lake, killing most of the children of the rural Canadian town of Sam Dent. Lawyer Mitchell Stephens arrives in town hoping to persuade the parents to hire him for a class action lawsuit to seek damages from the bus manufacturer or from some other unspecified entity. Throughout, Stephens is haunted by the fate of his drug addict adult daughter, who calls him to say she is HIV positive while he is in Sam Dent. He wins the trust of some, but gets a hostile reception from garage owner Billy Ansell who witnessed the accident, in which his two children died. The wreck of the bus sits behind Billy's garage while the possibility of

legal action is still open. Teenager Nicole Burnell – who was babysitter to Billy's children and who has had an incestuous relationship with her father Sam – survives the crash but loses the use of her legs. Stephens persuades her to testify but Nicole lies and claims that the bus was driving too fast, thereby destroying the lawyer's case. Her destruction of the case, against the wishes of Sam, is understood to be her way of punishing him for his abuse of her and also to be the decisive moment that eases the town's burden of grief.¹

3 Discussion

Bus 19 and *The Sweet Hereafter* present us with aftermath, with crime scenes. Each demands a backward chronological trajectory on the part of the viewer, a trajectory which echoes several modes of narration: the detective story, the psychoanalytic process, the commemorative object/statement. The object that is presented is thus a mystery to be solved, a symptom, a site of mourning, all of which invite us to return to the moment of violence in order to insert that disturbing object into some sort of coherence.

3a Discussion of Bus 19

Christians for Israel, who, as organisers and financiers, should be regarded as the curators of the Bus 19 tour, supply a clear narrative structure for the bus wreck. We may start with the masthead of their website, where the list of tour dates and speakers is given along with an explanation of the tour. The masthead immediately inserts the bus into a narrative of terrorism and its victims.

¹ This synopsis is based on that given by Jonathan Romney in *Atom Egoyan*, 126 - 7.



Figure 2 Masthead of Bus 19 website

For those who approach the bus in person, the message is roughly the same but is realised in rather more sober terms:



Figure 3 Placard beside Bus 19

The term 'suicide bomb murderer' declares the political stance of the exhibitors, but otherwise the information conveyed here is fairly neutral and fact-driven, not unlike a

museum label. However, what seems more pertinent is the placard's only adjective: 'actual'. This is not a reconstruction or a facsimile, but the real thing.² The visitor is not simply experiencing the story of Bus 19, rather Bus 19 itself is made present and available to the senses. The viewer is given privileged access to the original object, and thus Bus 19's status as a conveyor of truth seems to be heightened.

Bus 19 is not, then, a mere object. It has special status as the origin of the truth about what life in Israel, living with terrorism, is 'actually' like. As such, Bus 19 draws its power as an exhibit from two related sets of associations: those of the crime scene and those of the sacred site. In order to explore these associations, it is worth looking briefly at the organisation that owns the bus and originally made an exhibit of it.

It was a group of members of ZAKA that brought Bus 19 to The Hague in 2004. ZAKA is a voluntary emergency-response organisation, most of whose members are orthodox Jews, that specialises in collecting and identifying body parts and blood at bombsites and other similar sites. Recognised by the Israeli state and partly trained by the police, they can always be seen trawling through wreckage wearing distinctive yellow vests. The group's name, Zihuy Korbanot Asson, which means 'identifying victims of disaster', indicates the importance to ZAKA of preparing human remains (Jewish and non-Jewish) for proper burial and points to the group's religious mission. In the presence of ZAKA, I

² It is worth noting the value that many North Americans ascribe to 'real' historical objects from the Old World. The 'actual' would probably be absent from a sign in Europe, where the vogue for reproduction and authentic copies does not hold so much sway, and where objects are assumed to be real unless stated otherwise, and not the other way round.

would argue, a bombsite is not only a crime scene but it also accrues a religious significance.

Even without the linkage provided by ZAKA, the crime scene and the religious site are already similar topoi. Both are cordoned off from the general public and access is given only to specialists who are accredited by the powers of the state/religion. Both serve as ways of limiting and controlling the act of blood-letting: the sacred site's altar is the only place where a sacrifice may be enacted or re-enacted, while the scene of violent crime must be marked out in order to preserve the taboo against violent crime. Following from this, both, though polluted themselves, are to be kept scrupulously uncontaminated by the outside world and by outsiders. These scenes are also typically full of signifiers that only the specialist with arcane knowledge can read and interpret correctly, and both are treated according to ritualised rules.

Not only is Bus 19 a crime scene, it is also the object of the crime too. Its blasted remains echo the fate of the people on board the bus, and we may think of the body of the bus as a metaphor for the body of the victims. The bus is also the receptacle for the dead, a coffin, but one which seems to have been desecrated by being torn open and which contains no bodies. As a piece of evidence of a crime, the bus makes us think of the frozen moment one millisecond after the blast itself, which is somehow still in mid-explosion. In this

sense its aesthetic is akin to the crime scene photograph, which often conveys the sense that the criminal has only just left the scene.³

While the desecration of tearing open the bus was caused by the bomb and the person who detonated it, the exhibition of the desecrated bus transforms it into an artefact with cultural meaning and amplifies the initial act of desecration. By putting the bus on show, the exhibitors fail to leave the dead at rest and seem to be repeating the crime of tomb-violation, so notoriously perpetrated with grisly results in fiction and reality by, to cite a few examples, the archaeologists of the Tutankhamen excavations, the grave-robbers Burke and Hare, the Egyptologists of Hergé's *The Cigars of the Pharaoh*, and the Nazis who open the Ark of the Covenant in Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.



Figure 4

Tintin and Snowy, already encased in a tomb, discover their own empty tombs

³ Consider the observation of film critic Peter Wollen on surveying an exhibition of crime scene art: "[These works are] full of tears, rents, holes, cracks, and gashes. This evidence of the puncturing of an envelope (carnal, architectural) is the signifier of a recurrent act of forcible entry. These rents and gashes and unravelings and crumblings are also signifiers of decay and collapse. What was once hallowed ground has been violated and polluted." (Rugoff, 32)

Although the compulsion under Jewish law to bury the dead in their physical entirety and within 24 hours has been acceded to in the case of Bus 19, the logic of the Bus 19 tour seems to run contrary to those very rules, which underlie the mission of ZAKA. The religious tenets that hold as sacred certain objects, such as human remains, frequently lead to a fetishisation of the object itself. Judaism avoids the contamination of idolatry by refusing even to utter the name of the divinity, let alone worship an image or idol, because it has a certain awareness of the potential of the object that is venerated as an origin of truth to exceed human intention and control. In the exhibition of Bus 19, a quasi-religious artefact is treated as if it were a museum piece with a directly recoverable kernel of meaning that can be transmitted unproblematically. Not only does the exhibition of Bus 19 have to grapple with the challenge of ensuring the clear transmission of meaning (which it attempts to do with a website, labels and guest speakers), it also has to deal with an object whose multiple potential meanings disrupt the transmission of any single meaning. The object of Bus 19 is too 'actual'.

It is impossible to speak of a memorial to murdered Jews without also speaking of the Nazi extermination of European Jews. The trauma that it entails is not only a result of the event itself, but also a result of the fear that it might not be remembered. There is ample evidence of Jews in the extermination camps who, anticipating their possible erasure in history, became more determined to survive and to bear witness (Agamben, 34 -36). The Holocaust is by now extensively commemorated and documented, but it could be argued that the result of this is to reawaken, not to allay, the traumatic fear that all of those millions will remain murdered, forgotten, unrecorded and unburied. There is also a

notable tendency to present material evidence in Holocaust memorials (suitcases, eyeglasses, secret letters), again to defeat the possibility of non-existence, and the tour of Bus 19 emerges from this tradition. We may even reach further back to the originary trauma of the Jews, the Exodus, and view Bus 19 as an agglomeration of the sense of persecution and the sense of community achieved by a shared journey. The actual ('actual') wagon of a train used to transport victims to the Dachau death camp that is part of the permanent exhibition at the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum speaks of the same set of traumatic tropes. All of these one-way journeys also help us to make sense of the 'Terror – A One-Way Ticket' slogan of the website of the Bus 19 tour.



Figure 5 A banner on Bus 19 recalls Biblical persecution of the Jews

The scarification of Bus 19 may be taken to be the foundational, originary act of violence that can always be found at the creation of any archive. The blast, in these terms, was a moment of awful, traumatic truth that simultaneously destroyed life and created the wreck. The wreck then becomes the means by which the truth about terrorism may be

conveyed. Interestingly, the use of Bus 19 as a propaganda tool in the public relations battle about Israel's construction of the security barrier through Palestinian land draws attention to another originary moment of scarification: the remapping of the Middle East.⁴ The very name 'Bus 19' alerts us to the fact that it describes a line drawn across the land for the benefit of one population at the expense of the other. From the carve-up of the colonial-era Middle East to the present day, describing and naming lines and borders in the region is not simply a metaphor for conflict in the region, rather it *is* the conflict itself.

Bus routes in general are made possible by, and are constitutive of, state authority, city planning, communal life, bureaucracy and centralized power.⁵ Looking at Bus 19 from the wrong side of the Israel/Palestine fault line, i.e. from the bomber's point of view, to attack it is an effective way of making an assault both on Israeli people and on an emblem of their state (the explosion also took place very close to the residence of then-

⁴ The gruesome immediate aftermath of the Bus 19 bombing was posted on the website of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, <http://w3.castup.net/mfa/terror.htm> (select film 07), where it is still available. The images were used to bolster the argument in favour of the security barrier, with Foreign Ministry deputy director general Gideon Meir saying, "We have to show the world all the horror of terrorism... This terrorist attack is the best argument that we can use to defend the sacred right of Israel to exercise legitimate self-defense." (*Agence France Presse*, 1 February 2004)

⁵ Bus routes may then be thought of as akin to Heidegger's bridge in 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', i.e. they manifest and are manifested by the human experience of space. Bus 19 may not, however, be regarded as a dwelling, rather its opposite, as it is a space neither enclosed nor unenclosed which refuses to let its absent inhabitants to be 'set at peace', when we consider Heidegger's understanding of the term: "To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving.* It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth."

prime minister Ariel Sharon). Thus to attack Bus 19 is an attack on Israel and its values. As is so frequently the case with insurgent attacks on civilian targets, the object is at least partly to re-describe the seemingly natural and inoffensive features of civilian society as unacknowledged acts of aggression. By describing such a thing as a commuter bus as a legitimate target, the bomber refutes any notions of 'normality' or 'innocence' on the part of the people on board, regardless of identity, age, gender, etc.

3b Discussion of *The Sweet Hereafter*

It is the status of the bus as an emblem of communal life that lends it its peculiar power in *The Sweet Hereafter*. This is not simply a commuter bus, but a school bus, and so it brings with it all of the notions of hope, investment in the future, social responsibility, etc. that make its destruction all the more symbolically dreadful. Worse than that, the bus can be configured as a womb that has failed to protect, perhaps even killed, its young. The action of *The Sweet Hereafter* starts two years after the accident, with the town still in a state of shock over the loss of all but one of its children. The process of grieving is ongoing but still incomplete. The hulk of the bus is a material reminder of this unfinished business.

What the bus wreck is actually for is, however, the central debate in the film. It is not on display, but cached away at the rear of the town's only garage, unlabelled and unexamined. It is an object that stands for the unfinished business of grieving that the townspeople are going through. We may perhaps interpret it then in Derrida's terms as a crypt – as it is an enclosed space within the space of the town, scarred by loss, untouched

since the trauma that carved out the niche that it occupies. As long as the bus wreck haunts the townscape, only just visible but powerfully absent/present (we glimpse it only on a couple of occasions in the film), then catharsis remains unattainable.

When the lawyer Mitchell Stephens comes to town, he seems, with his gentle manner and studied sincerity, to be offering the prospect of catharsis. With his arrival, the bus takes on the potential to be transformed into evidence, into an item that can be inserted into an economy of meaning, into something that can make sense and yield a return (both in the sense of compensation and of a just judgement). The move that Mitchell wants to make is, in Derrida's terms, to move the bus into a public, forensic site, where it can be subjected to justice.⁶ But Mitchell himself contains a kernel of grief, the loss of his daughter to drug addiction/HIV, that results in violent, mostly suppressed, rage, which is briefly revealed for what it is in a confessional conversation with Zoe, his daughter's childhood friend:

Mitchell: "Enough rage and helplessness and your love turns into something else."

Zoe: "What does it turn into?"

Mitchell: "It turns into steaming piss."

⁶ In his foreword to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, which bears the title 'Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,' Derrida plays on the potential of the French *fors* to connote both interiority and exteriority, which is particularly apt in the present case, where the unopen/unclosed case of the hidden/unhidden bus is treated as *forensic* evidence, i.e. as something that will be brought into the open forum of the closed world of the courtroom.

Mitchell tries to give expression to his own anger by persuading the parents of the dead children to bring a suit. For him, the wreck of the bus is an archive of crimes committed deep in the past.

Mitchell: "There is no such thing as an accident, the word doesn't mean anything to me ... Somebody somewhere made a decision to cut a corner. Some corrupt agency or corporation accounted the cost variance between a ten-cent bolt and a million-dollar settlement. They decided to sacrifice a few lives for the difference ... It's the darkest, most cynical thing imaginable but it's absolutely true. And now it's up to me to ensure moral responsibility in this society."

The film provides us, however, with a locus of truth, and that is the teenager Nicole, who survives the crash but ends up in a wheelchair. Nicole reads Robert Browning's version of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* to two of the children on the night before the accident. This reading permeates the soundtrack of the film, particularly at the crucial moment when she is giving evidence on her memories of the crash. Nicole is also the survivor of incest with her father and as such is already the victim of trauma. The crippling of her legs draws a strong parallel between her and the lame child in story of the Pied Piper, who, because he cannot dance behind the Piper, is left behind and is ultimately the only survivor:

'It's dull in my town since my playmates left,

I can't forget that I am bereft

Of all the pleasant sights they see,

Which the Piper also promised me,
For he led them to a joyous land ...
where waters gushed and ... everything was strange and new.'

Nicole, now lame, bears the marks of the bus crash and they serve as a manifestation of the scars of her father's abuse of her. She seems, then, to be an expert on scarring and survival and it is she who finally stymies Mitchell's attempt to transform the bus from merely a fateful object into a piece of evidence. The bus remains simply an object because her intervention prevents what promises to be protracted legal action concerning the fitness of the bus. Ultimately, cathartically, the bus is removed from behind the garage to be disposed of and Nicole's voiceover addresses the well-meaning Mitchell: "I wonder if you understand that all of us, Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't, are all citizens of a different town now, a place with its own special rules and its own special laws, a town of people living in the sweet hereafter."

Stephens's narrative is one of blame and anger and these, it seems, have the potential only to prolong the grief of the town.

4 Conclusion

If the Jewish nation can trace its roots, its very identity, to a moment when the threat to its existence was overcome, the history of the Jewish state is marked by a similar threat to the existence of the Palestinians. None of the official documentation concerning Bus 19, including the placard in *Figure 3*, counts the Palestinian bomber among the dead (this is

the common practice of the Israeli government too). The trauma of erasure is repeated, this time by the victim on the perpetrator. The quoted death tolls issue a challenge to anyone who is ready to acknowledge the Palestinian as a person. We are reminded of the comment of the former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, that "there is no such thing as a Palestinian".⁷

But there is such a thing as Bus 19, the 'actual' object, and when it is made present to the viewer, it speaks eloquently about events and people who are beyond the realm of the viewer. Its presence in space makes it possible to conjure to the mind other, absent objects, even, or especially, those (such as the bomber, or the owner of the eyeglasses) whose unmissable presence is strangely elided. This making-present is the point of exhibiting any object as an historical artefact. It is appropriate, then, to ask a set of questions about the presentation of any object: Why this object? What was its original context? Why is it on show here and now? What other objects was it found with? Did the creator of the object intend it to be shown in this context?

It is at the level of these questions that the action of *The Sweet Hereafter* takes place. The bus wreck is neither on show nor is it hidden and the film takes place in the brief interval before a decision is made whether it should be treated as an object that should be scrutinised in this forensic way. In the end, the decision is made to dispose of it because the money and (questionable) justice that will be gained from using it as evidence outweigh the benefit of releasing it into the world beyond (beyond the town, beyond our

⁷ Quoted in *The London Review of Books*, 23 March 2006, 5.

perception). The choice made by Nicole on behalf of the town is to refuse to fetishise the bus-object, to refuse to ask a set of questions that will serve only to re-live the trauma.

Nicole's refusal is also a rejection of the bus as symptom. What she in fact does is tell a lie that suppresses the truth but which enables life to start again. She knows enough about symptoms, having already suffered the trauma of sexual abuse, to know that it is not always a good idea to know too much about them. The form of the symptom is secret for a reason – because knowledge of that secret may be too awful to contemplate. The question of whether or not anyone is to blame for the death of the children of Sam Dent, whether anyone should be made to pay, is not, in the final analysis, very important.

Mitchell's sense of justice is born of bitterness, and Nicole has the wisdom to recognise it for what it is. The case of Bus 19 could not be more different, for it invites such minute perusal from the viewer, who is invited to mount its platform and peer inside its windows, that the awful secrets of persecution, murder, non-commemoration, violation and injustice that fill the history of the Nazi era *and* the era of the modern Israeli state, are reiterated and relived as trauma.

An object can be said, then, to undergo a transformation by the fact of its exhibition. It is not that the object becomes merely important, rather the object may accrue a potency, an experiential, psychic force for the viewer. The neutrality of the museum space, the blankness of its walls, the cold hard facts of its labels recede and the viewer is delivered into the raw, pulsating environment of the crime scene, the altar, the opened coffin, the recurring trauma.

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