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Hakim Bey

Crisis of Meaning

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2001

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A few days after the event, the New York Times ran an interesting article on the advertising “industry” and its crisis. Not only zillions of dollars a day etc. etc., but a weird effect: suddenly it seems impossible to have advertising at all. It seems massively “inappropriate” to move product as per usual with shrieking & insinuating, mocking & sneering, prurience & peeping; with hate & envy masked as fashion, with greed thinly disguised as freedom of choice.

Death and tragedy occur every day, every minute, not only in the former Third World, even in New York, even in America. Why hasn’t advertising ever seemed shameful to anyone ever before? The media – which cannot utter a sound without puking up a cliché – speaks now of the waking of a sleeping giant (meaning that we will no longer terrorism etc.) – but what was this sleep? And what does it mean to wake into a feeling of shame?

Last week, it seems we were willing to admit that our highest social values could be expressed in price codes (the “mark of the Beast” as the cranks say, the “prophets of doom”). This week, we feel shame. In a Times interview a fashion designer expressed doubt that her work had any significance and wondered if she could go with it.

The fashion industry is also ashamed; Hollywood is ashamed; even the news media expressed some fleeting longing for decorum & dignity & decency.

Are we supposed to feel this shame over our triviality, our mean-spiritedness, our PoMo irony, our consumer frenzy, our hatred of the body and of all nature, our obsession with gadgetry & “information”, our degraded pop culture, our vapid or morbid art & lit, & so on & so on? – or should we defend all this as “freedom” and our “way of life”?

Our leaders are telling us to return to normal routines (after a decent period of mourning) in the assurance that they will assign significance to the event, they will embody our hate & desire for revenge, they will mediate for us with the forces of “evil”. But what exactly is this normal life to consist of? Why do we feel this shame?

Schoolchildren (again according to the Times) ask their teachers what it means that the terrorists were willing to die, to kill themselves; and their teachers evade the question, saying that “we don’t understand.” And the ad execs, they don’t understand either

— they're bewildered. Awake but confused by a crisis of meaning. Last week all meanings could be expressed in terms of money. Why should 5000 murders change the meaning of meaning?

A hyper-fashionable Italian clothing company uses death to sell its products. Photographs — even huge billboards — showing people dying of AIDS or waiting to be executed — designed to sell woolly jumpers. In this life as normal? Should we return to it?

For a few days no music was heard in the streets. No thumping bass speakers rattled the air, no chants of hate for women & queers, no "Madison Avenue Choirs" hymning the celestial delites of commodities or vacations in the midst of other peoples' misery.

For a few hours or days there appeared no official spin on the event, no slogan/logo in the media, no interpretation, no meaning. We watched the cloud drift around the city, first to the East over Brooklyn then up the west side of Manhattan, finally over the east side as well. With the smell and the poisonous haze around the moon came a nightmare about the occult significance of the cloud: — angry bewildered ghosts in a vast white cloud. And we breathed that cloud into us. We'll never get it out of our lungs. What the cloud wanted was an explanation, a meaning.

But next day the spin was in, the media had found or been given its hundreds who died trying to save themselves — "Attack On America", our freedom, our values, our way of life, carried out by "cowards" who were nevertheless not "physical cowards" (as some official explained in the Times). Perhaps they were moral cowards? He didn't say. Our faculty and students of color can't say.

Why do they hate us? A few people have asked but received no coherent answer. Do "they" hate "us" because we use 75% of the world's resources even though we only constitute 20% of its population? because we bomb Baghdad & Belgrade without risking even one American life? because we export a vapid sneering meanspirited culture to the world, video games about death, movies about death, TV shows about death, commodities that are dead, music that kills the spirit? because we've made advertising copy our highest artform? because we define "freedom" as our freedom to rule & be ruled by money?

The politicians have told that "they" envy us and our way of life and therefore wish to destroy it. Envy — yes, why not? The whole system of global capital is based on envy. It has to be. No envy, no desire. No desire, no reason to spend. No reason to spend, implosion of global capital, q.e.d. But then why should the ad execs & fashion designers & sports teams & entertainers feel this strange unaccountable shame?

And why should the terrorists have been willing to die just because they envy our wealth & our way of life & our freedom to buy, and spend, and waste? What does it mean?

After the Holocaust (or Hiroshima, or the Gulag) certain philosophers said that there could be no more art or poetry. But they were wrong apparently. We have poetry again. It may not mean the same thing it meant before. It may not mean anything. But we have it. And who could have dreamed at the gate of Buchenwald or Treblinka that one day we would have — Nike ads or sitcoms about lawyers?

Is any meaning going to emerge from the 9/11 event? Without meaning tragedy ends not in catharsis but simply depression, endless sorrow. Our leaders "seek closure" — perhaps by killing many Afghan children — perhaps by a new Crusade against the Saracens — and of course by a return to normal. We'll show "them" — by refusing meaning. We will sleep because it is our right not to awake to confusion & shame.

Our sleep will be troubled. We'll have to "sacrifice a few freedoms" to protect Freedom. We'll have to fear & hate. But within a few weeks or months we will have buried even the fear & hate, rather we will have transformed all that emotion to the Image, to the Evil Eye of the media, our externalized unconscious. We'll have sitcoms again and gangster rap and arguments about our right to download it all for free into our home computers. We'll get those airplanes flying, once again polluting "our" skies with noise & carcinogens. We'll overcome our shame. And that will constitute our revenge. That will be our meaning. Our morality.