

REITH LECTURES 2004: Climate of Fear

Wole Soyinka

Lecture 1: The Changing Mask of Fear

TRANSMISSION: 7 April 2004 – Radio 4

I have taken myself back to the late seventies when, at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts, I delivered a lecture under the title, 'Climates of Art'. Introducing that lecture, I made the following admission: I quote: "The title is of course deliberate. It is meant to trigger off those associative devices... so that 'Climate of Fear', 'Climate of Terror' etc. will surface in the mind without much conscious effort."

My departure point, my main area of concern at the time was the fate of the arts - and artists - under the burgeoning trade of dictatorship and governance through a forced diet of fear, most especially on the African continent - in common parlance, the fear of 'the midnight knock'. Arbitrary detentions. Disappearances. Torture as the rule rather than the exception. Even cynical manipulations of the judicial process where a political dissident found himself in what could be described as a revolving dock without an exit. Decades after that lecture, the world took bitter note of the hanging of the Nigerian activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his companions after a kangaroo trial - mostly because he was a writer, but also because his cause, that of ecological preservation, had become a global agenda.

At the time of that lecture, Nigeria, my immediate political constituency, was reeling under the execution, by firing squad, of three young men under a retroactive decree - in other words, the crime for which they were convicted - drug trafficking - did not carry a capital forfeit at the time of commission. That defiant act of murder had a purpose - to instil fear into the populace by deliberately flouting the most elementary principles of justice. And so on and on it went. The Nigerian event wrung two plays out of me - *A Scourge of Hyacinths* for radio, and *From Zia with Love*, its stage version - so persistently did that episode insist on haunting my re-creative temper. I was not alone. The entire nation was deeply traumatized.

While that regime lasted, there was no question about it - for the first time in the brief history of her independence, the Nigerian nation, near uniformly, was inducted into a palpable intimacy with fear, an experience that was never undergone even in the most brutal season of the colonial mandate. The question on every mind was simply this: those who were capable of a deed that revolted even the most elastic sectors of the public conscience, what else were they capable of? It is a question to bear in mind in attempting to understand what distinguishes, from the past, the new fabric of fear that we all seem to wear at this moment. As each assault on local or global sense of security is mounted or uncovered just in time, the residual question is surely: What next? Where? How? Are limits or restraints any longer recognised?

Serial Killer

What was happening on the African continent in those violent seventies and eighties was echoed, perhaps with even greater ferocity, in the Americas where those danger words, desaparecidos, right-wing murder squads - government sponsored vigilantes etc. gained international notoriety. Nicaragua, Chile, Argentina, Panama. Iran under the SAVAK. Apartheid South Africa under BOSS. Fear was near uniformly a state-run production line, except of course where right-wing volunteer agents of repression lent a hand - in Latin America especially. Between rightwing governments and the efficient state-run communist machinery, there was however hardly any difference - Hungary. Albania. East Germany, Bulgaria etc. Émigrés from these would-be utopias, no different from survivors of Apartheid South Africa. - both the defeated and the yet combative and conspiratorial - criss-crossed the world seeking help and solidarity. Again and again, our paths, as creative people, would meet, leading to that immediate question: how did creativity survive under such arbitrary exercise of power? How did Art survive in a climate of fear? Today, the constituency of fear has become much broader, less selective.

We are all agreed, I like to believe, on what constitutes fear. If not, we can at least agree on the symptoms of fear, recognize when the conditioning of fear has afflicted or been imposed on an individual or a community. Certainly we have learnt to associate the emotion of fear with the more ascertainable measure of a loss in accustomed volition. The sense of freedom that is enjoyed, or more accurately, taken for granted in normal life, becomes acutely contracted. Caution and calculation replace a norm of spontaneity or routine. Often, normal speech is reduced to a whisper, even within the intimacy of the home. Choices become limited. One is more guarded, less impulsive. A rapist is on the loose in society. A serial killer terrorizes an entire community - as happened recently in the state of Maryland in the United States where two men, an adult and his protégé, placed an entire state under siege as they picked off victims one by one.

Now such a disruption is a totally different sensation from a situation, where a town is placed under siege in a state of war. Even if bombs and rockets are raining down on the populace without cessation, the very process of war permits a certain space of volition, and thus reduces the inner debilitation that comes with total impotence. By contrast, in the case of Maryland, the murdering pair succeeded in making fear the controlling factor for a population. This anonymous force shut down schools and institutions and destabilized normal existence. Parents took to escorting their children right into the schoolroom, with nervous looks cast over the shoulder. Obviously, while the murdering spree lasted, there was deep resentment, even rage at the unknown assailant, but the commonest product of that phase was simply undirected fear. A notable aspect of all-pervasive fear is that it induces a degree of the loss of self-apprehension - a part of one's self has been appropriated, a level of consciousness, and this may even lead to a reduction in one's self-esteem - in short, a loss of inner dignity. Not always, admittedly, and those times when such a claim is invalid offers us the chance of making some crucial distinctions among the various contexts from which fear takes its special quality.

It so happens that I recently underwent an experience that enables me to reinforce such a distinction, one that may explain why the experience of fear is actually more tolerable in some circumstances than in others - in other words, there does exist a kind

of fear one can live with, shrug off, one that may actually be absorbed as a therapeutic incidence, while others are simply downright degrading. I refer to last year's fires that ravaged Southern California and resulted in the devastations of a larger swathe of land, we are told, than ever in the history of fires in the United States. I was one of those thousands of residents who found their homes in the path of the ravenous invader, unable to predict - literally - which way the wind would blow.

Naked Force

Well, let me describe what I observed in the comportment of neighbours. They were anxious of course, and fearful. Watchful and insecure. But their humanity was not abused or degraded by the menace that bore down on them. On the contrary, they were mostly in combative form, constantly exchanging news as well as tactical suggestions for saving the neighbourhood. As the fires came closer, choices became reduced. The relationship between that fire, a naked force of Nature - even though probably the work of arsonists - and the humanity that was menaced, was very different from the exercise of the power of an individual over another, or that of a totalitarian state over its populace. There exists a vast abyss of sensibilities between the raw force that is Nature on the one hand, and compulsion when imposed by one human being over another. In our next lecture, I shall make a further application of this distinction on human impulses, especially in the relationship of Power to Freedom. For now, let us merely observe that this contrast, between subjection to Nature forces and the human, has to do with yet another human possession, an attribute that is as much a social acquisition as it is inherent in the human species - dignity.

A few decades ago, the existence of collective fear had an immediately identifiable face - the atomic bomb. While that source is not totally absent today, one can claim that we have moved beyond the fear of the bomb. A nuclear menace is also implicated in the current climate of fear but, the atom bomb is only another weapon in its arsenal, the theoretical do-it-yourself kit that fits into a suitcase and can be assembled in a toilet. What terrifies the world however is no longer the possibility of over-muscled states unleashing on the world the ultimate scenario - the Mutual Assured Destruction that once, paradoxically, also served as its own mutually restraining mechanism. Today the fear is one of furtive, invisible power, the power of the quasi-state, that entity that lays no claim to any physical boundaries, flies no national flag, is unlisted in any international associations, and acts every bit as mad as the M.A.D. gospel of annihilation that was so calmly enunciated by the super-powers.

The last century, post World War II, was indeed dominated by the fear of a nuclear holocaust. That fear, let it be noted however, was only a successor to another. It replaced, once the war was over, yet another collective fear - that of world domination by a fanatic individual who preached, and sought to actualize a gospel of race purity. In the cause of that mission, some millions of humanity were systematically annihilated, while millions more perished on the field of battle that stretched from the North Pole to the South Sea Islands. As I narrated in my childhood memoirs, AKE: The Years of Childhood, the figure of Adolf Hitler was one fearsome presence that percolated distances, all the way from embattled Europe to far-flung colonial possessions. Parents invoked Hitler as the bogey-man to quiet the obstreperous child. And when, finally, a cargo ship caught fire on the lagoon in the capital city of Lagos, and explosions shattered windows even far away from the Marina, we, as children,

had no doubt that the Terror of the Free World had indeed arrived to cart us off into slavery.

That universal season of fear ended on the battlefield. In its place rose the fear of the very weapon of the world's liberation - at least, that was the excuse - whose devastating effects appeared to have no limitations. The literature of science-fiction took a swing towards prospects of a devastated world, peopled by mutants in whom the loss of the last vestiges of humanity would be reflected in their very physical decomposition. The cinema bore graphic witness to this mood. Beyond the grotesquerie, the caricatures and the gallows humour of a film *Dr. Strangelove* was a more than subterranean revelation of a pervasive fear, a caution and a strong moral message to the world to pull back from the nuclear brink. Leaving nothing to chance in its aim of exacting a moral apprehension of power and destruction through a recourse to negative memory - who can forget Peter Sellers' quietly manic performance, the arm that jerked up of its own volition in a Nazi salute, an iconography that was surpassed only by the whooping, rodeo ride on the back of a nuclear bomb into oblivion by yet another obsessed angel of M.A.D!

Carnival Atmosphere

That fear went, predictably, beyond artistic expressions and provoked practical responses. There were protest marches, Aldermaston being perhaps the pioneer and the most famous of them all. I took part in some of these, enjoyed their carnival atmosphere that was laced with purpose, was filled with excitement at participating in what struck me as a pre-emptive course of action by civil society. I felt that I was part of a universal undertaking, not to mention the thrill of actually marching in the company of the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, incidentally the first Reith Lecturer in 1948.

As the sabre rattling grew louder during this Cold War, and the super powers raced to surpass one another in mounting bigger and dirtier explosions, sneak a few of the deadly pods into the backyards of their ideological rivals, the fear of the atom bomb grew so affective that a few of my European acquaintances chose not to have any children, declaring that they were not about to provide fodder for the inevitable nuclear consummation. Some formed artistic and objector colonies in remote islands where they established communes, leading a simple life, culturing seaweed - for some reason that I cannot now recall - maybe for smoking - while they awaited the inevitable, from which, however, they fully expected to be spared.

Within my own continent however, it would have been virtually impossible to find one extreme example of the pre-emptive strategies that were adopted by the artist colonies of Europe, not even when, mid-century, the French rode rough-shod over the protestations of African nations and detonated the first nuclear device on African soil. Africans were already inured to other forms of fear, and a nuclear conflagration was such an exotic threat that the French explosion remained a pure political aggravation, not one that ever translated into visceral fear. Today, few of us on the continent will deny that the circumstances and the dimension of the current face of fear have transformed awareness even in our normally immune corners of the globe and brought into immediacy the charms of Europe's Artistic Exodus. The only trouble is, such over

active imaginations will find it difficult to think of a secure destination. Events of a hitherto unimaginable reach have rendered virtually every corner of the globe vulnerable. A sachet of sarin is located no one knows where, but is ready to be punctured when the signal is given. The banal, shopping bag left innocuously at the entrance to a metro station is eyed as a potential enemy, capable of devastation less dramatic but every bit as awesome as the sight of a plane hurtling down from the sky in a ball of flames.

A few months after the year of Lockerbie, in 1989 a UTA passenger flight - the UTA, like the Pan Am airline which has also collapsed - this plane was brought down by an act of sabotage over the Republic of Niger. That event was swallowed with total equanimity by African leadership. It was a silence which, I confess, gave me pause, and here is why. When French arrogance sought to spread the fear of the nuclear holocaust onto African soil, even during that immediate post-independence phase, a period of insecure nationhood, African states had not hesitated to act in concert - a response that I lauded in my earlier lecture - *Climates of Art*. The outrage of a continent was vocal and sustained. France was declared a pariah nation and numerous African countries broke diplomatic relations with the arrogant Gauls for infesting African soil with nuclear fumes. The economic consequences, in the main, were bravely ignored. On a personal level, since that outrage coincided with my debut on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre in London - one of those experimental one-night stands on a Sunday - I declaimed an angry poem in condemnation of such an act of continental disdain. With that concerted response on my mind, I think I could be forgiven for expecting no less than a roar of rage when a plane was deliberately blasted out of African skies.

Studied Muteness

Not a squeak was forthcoming. A planeload of humanity had been deliberately blown apart and, suddenly, the political touchiness of the continent appeared to have gone to sleep. I read of no credible warning to whoever the perpetrators were to kindly take their warfare elsewhere or be confronted with the concerted anger of African nations.

It was not the lack of focused attention, the lack of evidence of a commitment to ferret out the perpetrators of the UTA outrage, collaborating with all willing hands that troubled me, it was the studied muteness, and this, I felt, could only be borne out of fear. The political club that was then the Organisation of African Unity made only the most tepid statements of disavowal. If it set up its own technical commission of investigation, it must have been deliberately low key, an apologetic step that was shrouded in mystery - for fear of reprisals? What, in my assessment, dominated the thinking of many African leaders was frankly - let us keep mute and maybe the aggressor will exempt us from his current revolutionary rampage, or at least exercise his restraining influence and cloak us in selective immunity. They had only to recall that the emerging suspect, Libya, headed by a young maverick called Ghadafi, was then at the height of its powers. It advertised a progressive, even radical agenda, one that threatened corrupt as well as repressive African governments, provided training grounds for dissidents of the left, right or indeterminate - and not merely on the African continent. In short, the fear of Libya was the beginning of wisdom.

That silence obtained its rebuke when contrasted with the combative cry of the world over Lockerbie. In the case of Lockerbie, a painstaking exercise of detective work spanned continents. The culprits were not only identified but boldly advertised, and a pursuit of the malefactors undertaken until they were eventually brought before a court of justice. Even in the supposedly egalitarian domain of death, some continue to die more equally than others. However, the succession of Lockerbie by Niger had at least impressed one fact on the world: the enthronement of a qualitatively different climate of fear, an expression of global dominance through a disregard for innocents, without respect for territory, and without even a pragmatic questioning of the possible rupturing of existing political alliances. Libya was after all - still is - a member of the Organisation of African Unity, now the Africa Union.

Even as the foregoing was being drafted, just a few months ago, the world was astounded by a once unthinkable volte face by the Libyan government. I listened in a state of near-hypnosis as the Libyan leader stepped to up to the microphones to renounce, not only the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction but - terrorism! Within the radical caucuses of the sixties, seventies and eighties on the African continent, any suggestion that Mr Ghadafi was remotely linked with the promotion of acts that involved the arbitrary disposition of lives, and should be condemned for this, was greeted with those knowing smirks that declared one a victim of Western brainwashing and an enemy of the anti-imperialist struggle. The notion that there should be rules and restraints even within an accepted mandate of justifiable violence in the cause of a people's liberation was simply too abstruse a concept, one that identified only the lackeys of the imperialist order. Distasteful though the conclusion may be to such mind-sets, September 11 2001 has proved to be only a culmination of the posted signs that had been boldly scrawled, over decades, in letters of blood.

We are repeatedly bombarded with the notion that the world we once knew ended on Sept. 11, 2001. I have never been able to empathize with such a notion, and we shall look at the reasons why, as we proceed in our series. For now, let me simply admit that it is within that subjective context that I found it most appropriately symbolic that I, the only African passenger aboard a British Airways flight between London and Los Angeles on that day, should be the last person on the plane to learn what had happened, and perhaps one of the last few millions of the world population to know that the world had, allegedly, undergone a permanent transformation. It is an appropriate anecdote on which to end this introductory lecture.

Subdued Surprise

What happened was quite simple: my routine on most flights is quite predictable: laptop - mealtime and winetime - a bit of reading into - sleeptime - then laptop, all of which take place in a state of near total oblivion to my surroundings. On September 11, the routine was no different. I must have been in one of my sleeptime modes when the event occurred and announcements were made. On waking up, I simply reported back for duty with my laptop. When the pilot announced that we were now crossing the Welsh border and would shortly land in Cardiff, and I learnt from the steward that this was due to some security problems, I shrugged it off. It was not, after all, the first time that my plane had been diverted or done a full turnaround, close to mid-Atlantic, on account of some technical problems.

Here, I must confess to my own immersion in personalised fear. It was nothing but fear that schooled me into travelling with only hand luggage. True, I have always been a light traveller but the habit became de rigueur under the terror reign of King Sanni Abacha of Nigeria. So unscrupulous were the methods of that dictatorship that its agents did not hesitate to introduce contraband, specifically hard drugs, into the luggage of the opposition, then alert the Customs officials at destination of the approaching drug baron. If I lived under any real fear during the struggle to unseat that dictator, it was definitely that, over and above anything else.

That preamble simply explains how the fear of Abacha had turned me into one baggage-less passenger you could swear by on any flight, and thus the very first passenger out of the Customs area. I ensconced myself in the bus that had been provided to take us to our hotel, settled down to read. Minutes passed, then an hour. Impatient now, I got down from the bus to find out into what hotel we were booked, then look for a taxi. I recognized some of the passengers from my flight huddled around a Mobile telephone, while others queued up for the single public contraption nearby. Thus did I begin, at long last, to suspect that something truly out of the ordinary was responsible for our turnaround. Only then did I learn, nearly eight hours after the event, that the world I knew was supposed to have disappeared, or become altered unrecognizably.

Well, I must confess that the world still looked the same to me, not only on the outside but from what I sensed inside. And this was because my mind flashed in that instant to the day, twelve years earlier when, for me, the world chose to pretend that nothing unusual had occurred over the continent of Africa, at the edge of the Sahara, knowing fully well that agents of a yet unidentified cause had sown the seeds of fear in the hearts of millions of people. The leadership of the world, including the leaders of that continent, chose to absorb this abnormality as only yet another incident in the war of causes, though even the most tenuous rules of engagement had been unilaterally re-written to eradicate the rights of the innocent.

Maximum Toll

What had I expected? I suppose an equivalent, even at that early signal, of the tragically belated sense of universal outrage that greeted the destruction of the World Trade Centre, an event timed deliberately to take the maximum toll of innocents of all nationalities, races, and religious adherence. Africans, including Nigerians, were not exempt, any more than they were in the UTA aerial inferno, an event that prefigured the later direct, terrestrial assaults on Kenya and Tanzania. 1989 for me was, therefore, the moment when the world first stood still, waiting for a response whose commensurate nature was required to re-start the motions of the globe. That response was lacking, at least in intensity, certainly in its neglect of a global repudiation, and mobilisation. The world jettisoned all notion of a common humanity. That lack consecrated Lockerbie, paved the way for Air India years later, attributed briefly to Sikh extremists, and set the scene for September 11, 2001. From Lockerbie through Niger to Manhattan, the trail of fear had stretched and broadened to engulf the globe, warning its inhabitants that there were no longer any categories of the involved or the non-involved. No longer could, not just innocents, but even a community of historic victims that inhabit the African continent, lay claim to a protective immunity.

Just as there was gloating over the predicament of white settler farmers in Zimbabwe, and a history of colonial injustice is held by some to justify current injustices, as a suffocating climate of fear envelops the entire land and its citizens, white or black, even so was there gloating in places, even open festivities, over September 11, as the world was sentenced to existence in a perpetual state of fear. And the judges? Are they identified, and/or justified by history? By geography? Race? Ideology? Or religion? That emotive last especially - religion - and unquestionably, the occupation of world centre stage by Islam during this epoch of global fear is a phenomenon that has provoked extreme reactions, such as the attribution of collective responsibility on the one hand, and the guilt-ridden, avoidance language of Political Correctness on the other. We shall explore some of these viewpoints in future lectures.

For now, let it suffice to acknowledge that responses to any challenge to the security of all, or any part of the human society and indeed, survival, are bound to be varied, some shaped by the history of global relationships, others by instinctive partisanship in a world that has become truly polarized. Any course of action, or inaction, that appears to encourage impunity, does implicate, however, the submission of the world to a regimen of fear. Yet that very recognition makes it possible to propose that it is within collective, not unilateral action - a theme to which we shall return - that we can sustain the hopes of humanity's survival. Terror against Terror may be emotionally satisfying in the immediate, but who really wants to live under the permanent shadow of a new variant of the world's - Mutual Assured Destruction?