

Pretty Colors 2-23-98

The well-known poet Amiri Baraka once remarked that rationalizations about reactionary art being quality art, in spite of the content, is like dropping a bomb on someone and saying, "Oh, look at the pretty colors."

I forget the movie he was discussing at the time, but the point was that art is a powerful weapon, a hammer with which to forge a new or maintain an old society – just as bombs do in a more direct way. The deeper issue in bombs or art is the values of a society, the vision of itself it creates and projects.

Art, like society, at its most important levels, is not about aesthetics or beauty, but vision. Anyone can create beauty, but few can present real vision – no matter what the art form.

Interestingly, it is reactionaries who have historically placed the greatest social value on questions of aesthetics, in particular the beauty of order. For example, European fascist political theory attempts to aestheticize society by elevating order – as an aesthetic -- to a supreme position in social values. Questions of right and wrong are decided based on a values system that has order as its priority. They may have used a language of ethics and morality, but the standard for decision making was order.

Clinton's position on ethics strikes me as containing the same sense of the value of order, and thus absurdity. Iraq is operating outside of the proscribed order. Saddam is messing up the post-Cold War aesthetic of a harmonized world, which is to say, a world ordered around the desires of global corporations to rape and pillage.

As I understand it, the president is interested in bombing the innocent civilians of Iraq because their leader refuses to allow inspections of sensitive sites, which may or may not contain "weapons of mass destruction." Ramsey Clark, the former Attorney General pointed out that only an idiot would agree to the terms of the inspections being demanded by Clinton. According to Clark, the inspection teams are quite capable of placing small targeting devices that would pinpoint the locations of these sites -- many of which are vital for non-military reasons -- for future precision bombing.

Some would claim that Iraq has nothing to fear if it only complied, but obviously many outside of Congress and the White House, as well as the entire rest of the world, think this argument doesn't hold much water. And in Arab countries in particular U.S. actions are seen as cruel, hypocritical and bullying.

What would war accomplish? Preserving the order. The president is willing to continue killing 5,000 innocent children every month with the sanctions against Iraq and is willing to kill God knows how many innocent Iraqis and American military personnel, and why? Because he says that he believes that Iraq will use chemical or biological weapons in the future.

He believes? And we are to slaughter innocents halfway around the world because he believes? This is pure fantasy. No sane person could argue that anything resembling moral authority supports bombing Iraq. Killing innocent civilians cannot be about ethics, or justice, it can only be about order -- not a moral order, but an aesthetic one.

Iraq points out that Israel has nuclear weapons and has jailed people for daring to discuss this openly. There are U.N. declarations concerning the necessity of inspecting Israeli weapons programs. Yet these declarations are conveniently not mentioned by our president. And further, Israel is currently occupying the territory of three other nations as

well as keeping the masses of the Palestine people as virtual slaves. Ah, but Israel is part of the order already, so they are encouraged (as Saddam was a decade ago) – not starved and bombed.

And the president believes that Iraq will use these weapons, if they have them. He never actually seems to commit to believing that Iraq has these theoretical weapons. But he believes these theoretical weapons will be used.

Of course he cannot say that Iraq either has or doesn't have these weapons. Though all of us are quite sure that the president does know the answer to this question. If he admits to knowing about them, and where they are then the whole inspection process is obviously a charade. If we know that they exist and where they are then the U.N. would remove them – end of story, end of sanctions.

If the president knows that Iraq does not actually have these weapons then that too proves that the inspection process is a charade. Thus he can only say that he believes Iraq might have these weapons. Yet he believes these weapons will be used. Is this the logical discourse of a sane human being? Of course not, but the issue is not sanity, it is the beauty of the order implicit in imperialist class relations.

The president can claim that morality drives his decisions, but in the end he is committing genocide according to the U.N.'s own definition of that term. He is committing genocide to preserve a demented sense of order – however beautiful this order may be to some it is still genocide.

Perhaps we will kill enough people that Iraq will comply with the president's sense of order. And, as a side effect, just imagine all the pretty colors.