



“Delightful Horror”

A War Without a Script

IMAGE BY THE AUTHOR





BANU HELVACIOĞLU

To me, the defining moments of the so-called coup attempt were in that hour, when sonic effects of F-16 warplanes bombing various different locations in Ankara were exacerbated by the blackout of national and international satellite transmission. This is what “epistemic blindness” must be like: something was happening, but I didn’t know what and where. All I could do was to follow the sounds of planes, helicopters, and gun battles from my balcony. The warplanes were flying at low altitude over my head. What a terrifying sound they make. The sounds of an exchange of gunfire were coming from over the hillock behind the pastureland, where the Gendarme Training Command is located ...

In the summer I go to bed with all the windows open. The neighbourhood tends to be quiet, with most people gone somewhere for holidays. I live in the outskirts of southwestern suburbia in Ankara, adjacent to a village. Since I moved to this neighbourhood in the late 1990s, the villagers have been gradually giving up their rural habits. I no longer hear the roosters in the morning, but my living room window faces the village’s common property of a pastureland for sheep. If the imam of the mosque in the village turns off the microphone at night, I can sleep through the early morning prayer.

In a social and political setting where solitude and individualism are assumed to be the same, my instinct for self-survival becomes one with an individuated struggle to keep *my* pluralistic spirits alive. I have acquired this self-survival mode in the aftermath of *Gezi Direniş* – a spontaneous resistance movement that emerged in June 2013 to protect Gezi Park in Istanbul and quickly transformed into broad coalition movements across the country peacefully protesting the ruling AKP’s policies infringing on life in general.

The unrest in major cities was quelled by special police forces and unidentified thugs who attacked civilians with knives and sticks, for which the government accepted no responsibility. When an individual’s existence is officially acknowledged only by unclassified violence, and when social media encounters and work-related stresses are multiplied by a





series of suicide bomb explosions across the globe, I tend to rely on my intuitions with the occasional help of e-mail and international news broadcasting. I am one of the last remaining human beings who forget to use a cellphone for daily communication.

BETWEEN July 2015 and June 2016 there have been numerous suicide bomb explosions in Turkey. The one that most affected the pace of my work occurred in March 2016 on a Sunday evening. The target was an Ankara public transportation hub located near cafés that are usually full of young people. I happened to know a few of the survivors.

In the remaining weeks of the winter 2016 academic term, I started my classes with a five-minute life-enhancing session featuring cartoons by Jean-Jacques Sempé, some inspirational photographs by Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, some music and anecdotes. There is no band-aid solution to the constant anxiety about the well-being of my loved ones during frequent episodes of ISIS-led horror around the world.

In late June 2016, I was glued to BBC and France 24 to figure out what the Brexit vote implied in Britain and the EU. I teasingly wrote to a friend living in London, who was slightly depressed about the Labour Party's stance on the referendum, that I followed the weather forecast for Ankara on BBC. How on earth did Scotland decide to stay within the EU? I was wondering about that while driving to the Provincial Police Headquarters to renew my car registration card, one day after the ISIS attack on Istanbul's international airport.

That early morning of June 30, when I was standing in line outside the police headquarters, feeling like one of those plastic ducks in a shooting range, I surveyed the area only to see for myself how easily I could be dead in an instant. Bureaucracy in Turkey kills one softly – in metaphorical terms, of course. In spite of the online booking system, it took me two days to renew my registration. During the next visit, the actuality of my own death was replaced by a physical fatigue due to hot, dry weather intensified by traffic, and polluted air mixed with visible layers of dust on my body. I wanted to “beam myself” first to my friend's backyard in Kingston, Ontario, then to another friend's organic farm near Mohone Bay, Nova Scotia. Happy Canada Day to you all, *et bien sûr, à mes amis*.

Not a happy Bastille Day in France. On the evening international news on July 15, an image stuck in my mind – a single colourful flip-flop of a girl left on the street amidst the horror unleashed by a suicide truck, driven by a member of ISIS in Nice. My four-year-old goddaughter has a similar pair. It is amazing how kids can play their flip-flops like a musical instrument, kind of hopscotching, chirping away.





IMAGE BY THE AUTHOR





Good Morning: July 16, 2016

I went to bed utterly unaware of the unfolding unrest in the nation. A weird noise woke me. I tried to sleep through it. Then I heard it again - this time louder, as if some place was being bombed. Something was happening. I unthinkingly turned on the TV, minutes after the National





IMAGE: L. SENA BILGIN

Parliament building was bombed. In less than an hour – approximately between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. – by switching back and forth between national and international channels I learned of the unfolding coup attempt in Turkey. One piece of information, in the form of flowing headlines at the bottom of the screen, caught my attention: all three opposition parties, including the pro-Kurdish HDP, were denouncing the coup attempt.

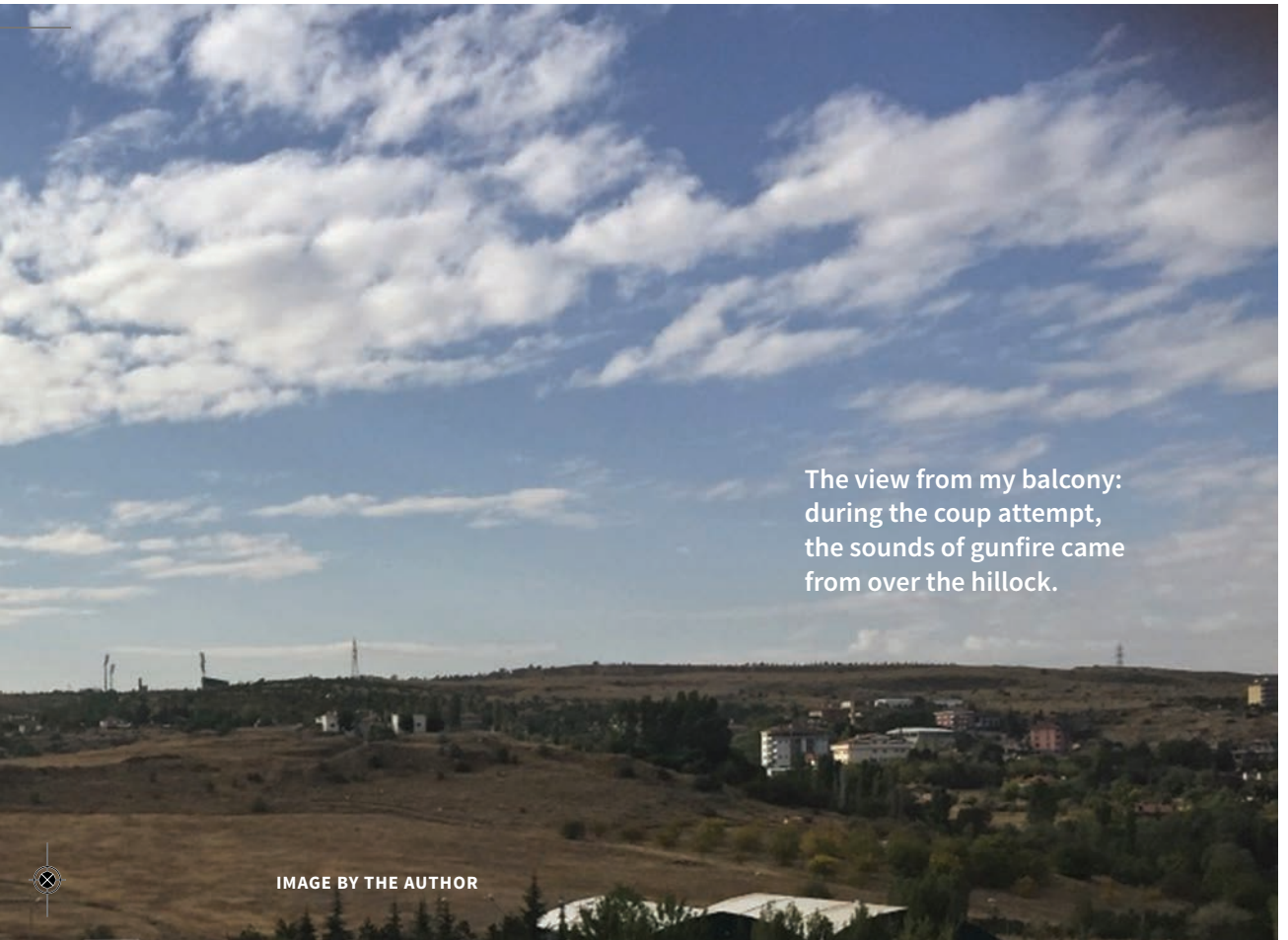




After a momentary sense of relief, I watched the astonishing scene of the CNN Türk building being evacuated by perpetrators of the coup, taped by a hidden camera, broadcasting live. I listened as the head of the news department tried to reason with the extremely nervous armed soldiers. Shortly after that my TV screen went blank for about an hour between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. The blackout could have been the result of the bombing of Türksat – the state organization in charge of satellite transmission facilities – or, as NTV news reported later, it may have been caused by the sabotage of Digiturk, the largest commercial cable company.

To me, the defining moments of the so-called coup attempt were in that hour, when sonic effects of F-16 warplanes bombing various different locations in Ankara were exacerbated by the blackout of national and international satellite transmission. This is what “epistemic blindness” must be like: something was happening, but I didn’t know what and where. All I could do was to follow the sounds of planes, helicopters, and gunfighting from my balcony. The warplanes were flying at low altitude over my head. What a terrifying sound they make. The sounds of an exchange of gunfire were coming from over the hillock behind the pastureland, where the





The view from my balcony:
during the coup attempt,
the sounds of gunfire came
from over the hillock.

IMAGE BY THE AUTHOR

Gendarme Training Command is located. I could not determine the direction of the helicopters. At the time I was still not fully cognizant of the fact that helicopters are not always used for civic aviation purposes and that there is something called the Sikorsky helicopter, which is capable of bombing. All throughout the night I developed a sonar system to distinguish between the sounds of F-16 jets used by coup members and the aircraft that were chasing them. The nearby mosque repeated calls for people to come out into the streets.

I did not see any action in my neighbourhood or hear any mass movement in the nearby village. Rex, my pal, the neighbour's well-mannered golden retriever, did not even woof. Even the stray cats and dogs, which sometimes get in a frenzy of meowing and barking en masse, were subdued that night. Later that day neighbours told me that there were long lineups in front of ATM machines. Much to the dismay of national sentiment, some EU officials later inquired about looting, but no one raided the supermarkets, or any other food-related places,





for that matter. No one asked how the homeless and refugees from Syria fared that night.

People did, however, come out that night to resist against the coup plotters. There has been plenty of international footage of scenes of people's resistance across the country. After I watched local news reports, it seemed to me that the most common form of resistance used in towns and small cities was to barricade local administrative buildings using all the available construction equipment provided by municipalities. The most patriotic form of resistance I heard of took place in Kazan, a town in Ankara Province, with surrounding villages, located near the airbase that was used by coup members for launching F-16s. In one village the locals, who had nothing else to use as either a form of protest or a defence of their homeland, burned their crops in the fields so that the smoke would block the fighter pilots' vision. The mayor proudly announced to the world that the villagers declined any compensation for their lost harvest.

I was born in this city. My loved ones, along with my mother tongue, are buried in two different cemeteries. Were they resting in peace that night? The F-16s and Sikorskys somehow spared the cemeteries – or they were on a more important mission against the living. I had a brief exchange of messages with my sister, who was with some family members on the Aegean coast. Who else but to a sister does one complain about a splitting headache on a morning of such ruin? How often does one start a Saturday at the crack of dawn inquiring about the well-being of family, friends, neighbours, students, and colleagues?





IMAGE: L. SENA BILGIN

The university where I work sent a collective message through the central mail system by mid-morning “strongly condemning the coup attempt,” adding with a human touch that, to the knowledge of the administration, there had been no reported casualties within the university community. It was a relief at a time when there was no way of knowing the death toll, or the number of those seriously injured throughout the night.

When satellite transmission resumed its regular flow, I camped in front of my TV for an immeasurable amount of time. My academic reflex in political theory was numb. Carl Schmitt defines the political as the sovereign decision of the state to distinguish between friends and foes. He also states that in war the political ceases to exist. The president, prime minister, and the parliamentary opposition party (CHP) leader escaped assassination attempts. The organizers of the coup confiscated the TRT (Turkish Radio and Television) building in Ankara and forced the anchorwoman to read a military declaration. I later read the text. Compared to the declaration of the 1980 *coup d'état*, which had an ideological theme in tune with anti-communist Cold War rhetoric, this one was so inarticulate that it was impossible to identify the intended reason behind such an intense military action.

There was some confusion about the whereabouts of the heads of military divisions on that infamous Saturday. The chief of the general staff and his aide, who were abducted from their office on that night, were saved by a military operation. The aide I saw walking next to the general in TV footage a few days later reportedly “confessed” to his involvement with the plotters. The president’s military aide was also among the first arrested.

Throughout my youth as a student, I lived in a neighbourhood that was five or six bus stops from the National Parliament and the urban intersection – *Genel Kurmay* – named after the military. I could see with my eyes closed what that intersection might have looked like on the morning of July 16, 2016. In my imagination, I also had a vivid picture of the Provincial Police Headquarters that I had visited only two weeks earlier. I did not need to see it on TV again and again. The sounds of gunfire reaching my backyard were nothing like the sort I remembered from my youth in the 1970s. Later in the evening, in response to a friend in Kingston who “was officially freaking out,” I wrote: “It seems to me that we were on the verge of a war,” without realizing the fact that the military bases that are currently used to bomb ISIS sites in northern Syria and to “fight against PKK terrorists” on the southeastern front had been confiscated by the organizers of the coup attempt.

THAT Saturday night when I finally went to bed, I heard the crickets from the open window. It was delightful horror. Trauma produces strange bedfellows. “Delightful horror” is a notion Edmund Burke used in 1757, to define the sublime that is “capable of producing delight, not pleasure [not indifference, not grief, but] ... a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror.” Burke associated delightful horror in “its highest degree” with astonishment, and in “the subordinate degrees” with “awe, reverence, and respect.” According to Burke, “the modifications of sound, which may be productive of the sublime, are almost infinite.”¹ That night crickets sounded infinitely divine. Since then, wars against “terrorists” continue to have devastating consequences for civic life. The implosion of a war machinery in my backyard is a story that is being retold, renamed in such a way that crickets are still music to my ears: *La paix repose en paix!*

Note

- ¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by James T. Boulton (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 84–85, 136.


BANU HELVACIOĞLU teaches modern political theory and aesthetics of politics in the Department of Political Science at Bilkent University. Her recent publications are on melancholy/mourning and death with an emphasis on Continental philosophy and literature. She is currently working on the configuration of the relationship between art and life in Don DeLillo’s works. 



IMAGE: AGNIESZKA SROKOSZ



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