

Impressum

Klaus Bung: Sleepers wake

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The new millennium
truly arrived
with the Manhattan terrorists
on 11 September 2001.

Klaus Bung: Sleepers Wake

[see Footnote (1)]

1: The Last Supper

[see Footnote (2) and (3)]

31 December 1999. Michael is not in love with the millennium and, indeed, had started a "Keep the Millennium out" campaign, not a popular enterprise, but he had his supporters, and there they stood, a thin red line (4) of heroes with the motto "Ave, Anne, morituri te salutant" (5), preferring to die with honour rather than to live in shame. Sad to say the millennium was unstoppable, and Michael could not altogether escape shame.

He spent the last afternoon of the year in the delightful company of the Countess of O (Viscondessa do P, Baronesa da Q), with a long walk along the river Douro towards the Ribeira, the ancient quarter of Porto. They sat on the deck of a boat restaurant sipping little cups of strong coffee, watched a seagull eating a fish on a jetty, saw the venerable names of Sandeman, Burmester, Cockburn (no, we do not say "cock") (6), Offley, Dow, Croft and Ferreirinha (7) across the river and felt secure in this ancient untroubled world, watched the sun sink for the last time into the Atlantic, observed the slowly changing colours in the sky and their reflections on the water, the half-hourly ferry going to the little fishing village south of the river.

They saw, as the Countess pointed out, how in Portugal all strata of society manage to live cheek by jowl, the high-fashion shop,

the rare-books shop and the goldsmith mingling with the iron-monger, the fish-monger and the green-grocer, the fishermen squatters living inside and outside their cargo-containers on the river bank, unmolested by the authorities and unconcerned with promenaders wending their way across their territory, next to expensive villas and high-rise flats with unaffordable rents -- the lawyer's stately home, floodlit, with its private footpath to the Domus Justitiae (8) half a mile away, overlooking it all.

They were content in this orderly and yet homely world. The streets were oddly silent, eerie almost: no cars, no boisterous pedestrians: were people sleeping now in order to be awake at the great moment? There was no sign that anything special was about to happen. The millennium was approaching on tiptoe.

At 7.30 they felt cold and hungry, the Countess selected a cosy family-owned and -run restaurant with four or five small dining rooms. They could stay till 9.30, when staff and owners would go to their own millennium celebrations.

They were the first couple to occupy their table in the first-floor dining room. Next to their table for two, a long table for thirteen had been laid. A middle aged woman with the face of a schoolmarm (9) and round spectacles on a pointed nose stepped (10) in. She had a large print of Leonardo's famous painting, to which the caption AMOR DAVINCIT OMNIA (11) (12) had been added. She pinned it up above the table, giving the setting a sacramental air. She, obviously the organiser or hostess, rearranged the large table fastidiously, laid a little present, carefully wrapped, on each plate, so homely, so worthy, prudent, so well-thought-out. "How lovingly she is preparing for her guests!" Michael thought, "a picture of the petty bourgeoisie of Portugal". Michael, the bachelor, would never have managed that.

The other tables in their small dining room had by now been occupied: a group of young Frenchmen and women, a large Portuguese family with a sweet, innocent-looking 10-year-old boy, two Italian intellectuals, and a dignified man with greying hair and a mastery of English and French and his stunning young African girlfriend, who spoke English.

Gradually the guests of the table next to theirs, the Leonardo table, arrived, all eleven of them women, from 20 to 55, all dressed up to the nines, all of them had done the best they could, yet their skirts were somewhat too short, their blouses too tight, their hair fiercely dyed, their make-up had been laid on with a trowel. They embraced one another with loud shrieks of joy and filled the whole room with their overwhelming uninhibited presence. "You know what they are?", whispered the Countess, "Hollow women!" (13)

"Hollow women?"

"Working girls!" (14)

The Countess, not without embarrassment at having to spend New Year's Eve in such company, notwithstanding Portugal's famed mutual tolerance among races, classes, professions and views, explained that the language of their neighbours, while not breaking the rules of taboo, was getting close to the threshold of the vulgar, was not very elegant, the very opposite of what is "done" in aristocratic circles. Their little table seemed like an appendix to the loud Leonardo party, a little Kuwait beside a bubbling Iraq, ready to be swallowed up. (15)

"Why do we not ask if we can join them?" Michael thought, "We can cheer them on, instead of having them impede our whispered communications, they will surely welcome us with open arms!", but he knew better than to speak.

"They haven't drunk anything yet, imagine what they will be like once they have had a few bottles of wine!" warned the Countess. She was right. The din from the neighbouring table increased steadily. Every remark was received with hoots of laughter and ripples of giggles. The women opened their little parcels and noisily admired the content of each: a comb, a bangle, a bottle of perfume, a toothbrush, a garden gnome, a packet of handkerchiefs, a photoframe...

They were feeling warm. To shouts of "Tira, tira, strip, strip", up they stood, and off came their coats in unison, and they stretched their limbs and showed their vitality through their tight skirts and blouses. Nothing further happened. Here was a group of colleagues who like everyone else wanted to be conventional and celebrate the unstoppable millennium and, as the posters all over town had reminded us, the 2000th birthday of our Saviour. The thirteenth chair at the centre of the tarts' table was kept free throughout the evening, for we know neither the day nor the hour when the boss man comes, gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners (16), ready to receive all to his bosom.

The other guests had long ago noticed that there was something special about this party, they craned their necks in order to catch a glimpse of what was going on, were as curious as Michael and tried, at the same time, to be discreet. It would not do to stare.

Michael's conversation with the Countess could not develop: He was distracted, wanted to understand what was happening at the Last Supper table and needed help in doing so. So they were talking more about the whores than each other, and the "Psallite, jubilate, resonet in laudibus, omnis mundus iucundetur!" (17) which arose from there made it difficult for the two to communicate across their little table.

The most interesting things are often impossible to ask about or find out. Many people all over the world refused to work on New Year's Eve because they did not want to miss the celebrations; those who did work demanded extortionate payment. What would our

neighbours do after their dinner? Continue celebrating and abstain from work (other people's pleasure is their work)? Go on night-duty? Would they try to double and quadruple their charges, and would they find customers at such rates? Is it even thinkable that a man wants so badly to bore a whore at this millennial turning point that he does not consider the cost?

The Countess smiled: "Nothing is so stupid that a man will not do it."

Today women are the equals of men even in sexual matters. Michael has an advertisement from a contact column in his pocket and shows it to the Countess: "Very raunchy gang-bang girl, legs wide open, wants to see the new millennium in with a real big bang. Wants to be fucked senseless and endlessly by any cocks in double figures. Two for starters, then working upwards. Blow your minds with this explosive nympho and celebrate in style. Undraped photo. All letters answered. Berkshire."

"Jesus Christ!" exclaims the Countess, "where on earth did you find that?"

Michael shows her the reverse side of the clipping: " 'Desire. Erotic Inspiration for Women and Men', Issue 29, 1999, London, p 109". The Countess sighs and Michael feels her knee press against his.

When Michael and the Countess left two hours later, the Belles de Nuit (18) were still noisily celebrating. If anyone was carefree and happy that evening, they were.

In Portugal it is customary to say Good-bye to other guests in a restaurant, at least to those sitting at adjoining tables. Etiquette has to be observed. Michael had made eye contact even earlier. Michael and his companion bowed to them with "Boa noite, Senhoras! Bom Ano Novo!" (Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night!), which was accepted and reciprocated with loud applause, as if it had come from the Prince of Denmark and his love.

The youngest of the women raised up an anti-AIDS poster which had been prominently displayed all over Porto and sadly had given the Pope an attack of migraine (19) which lasted for five months and prevented him from coming to Fatima on 13 May 2000. The text was "Feliz Ano 2000" (Merry Year 2000), with a small SIDA-message (20) in the bottom right corner. The "Feliz Ano 2000" was repeated all over the poster, always slightly out of alignment to avoid the formation of columns, in many cheerful colours. The innumerable zeros, however, were made of condoms (21). You cannot imagine a merrier year 2000.

They walked back to the car, a long walk, the streets were still very quiet. If there are any millennium parties taking place, they are certainly very discreet. They made love in the car, its windows misted, the erect lighthouse of Foz (22) faintly visible

in the distance, raced back to the Countess's apartment, switched on the lights, opened the windows just in time to let the victorious millennium in before it shattered them, while all the factory sirens went off to a man (23), the dogs started barking, and some fireworks shot up in the distance.

This is the way the millennium came (24)
With seven bangs and a whimper.

2: Judgement Day

[see Footnote (25)]

Michael thought then that this was the end of the story. Or the deadpan beginning of the millennium. However, it was a false dawn. Stories seldom end where they end.

In the morning of Monday, 10 September 2001 (26), the Countess gave a lecture on 'Baudrillard and the Reality Gulf' (27) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (28). She pulled out all the stops. Her interpretive community (29) was jubilant. She and Michael made it to Boston just before the Registry Office closed. Pledges were given, rings and kisses exchanged, for better or worse until death us do part. They had not planned a honeymoon. Los Angeles was a spontaneous decision. An instinct. Hers. The airline promotion posters said: WE FLY YOU STRAIGHT TO YOUR DESK. That was intended to attract business travellers. 'We fly you straight to your death', Michael had quipped. A modern man, he was no respecter of taboos and superstitions.

On Tuesday morning, they boarded Flight 175 (30). Their last breakfast was served on plastic trays. They were joined by the millennium, which was on its way to Manhattan and determined to get there. It arrived twenty months late, a trifle in percentage terms (31). Two horsemen (32) were sitting on the wings of the plane. The third rode on its neck. He held its reins with his left and a scythe (33) in his right hand. The fourth rode on its tail. The sun rising above the clouds shone through the skeleton of the plane. A cloud of millennium bugs (34) was following from the horizon.

The millennium arrived with a bang. It was over in a flash. The victims did not even have time to whimper. They knew neither the day nor the hour. (35)

^FOOTNOTES

1. Sleepers wake: The title and the last sentence of the story ('They knew neither the day nor the hour.') allude to Jesus's parable of the wise and the foolish virgins, some of whom are prepared at all times to meet the bridegroom, who will arrive when he is least expected, and some are not (Matthew 25:1-13). The parable ends with the admonition: 'Watch (be awake) therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man

cometh.'

The German Lutheran pastor Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608) wrote the words and the tune of a chorale interpreting this parable: 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme', sung in English churches as 'Sleepers wake, a voice is calling'. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) wrote a cantata and a chorale prelude based on this tune and text, and thus it became internationally known.

The title has a terrifying ambiguity: Who are the sleepers who are brutally woken up by the Manhattan incident: the world, the western world, America, the victims in the planes or in the World Trade Center, who are about to be catapulted into 'the other world', complacent people in general? Or the terrorists who have been planted in our midst to lead seemingly innocent and inactive lives (so-called 'sleepers') until the call goes out to them to swing into action?

2. Part 1, The Last Supper, is set in Porto (Oporto), Portugal. The second part, Judgement Day, in Boston, Mass., and Washington, DC.
3. The Last Supper: Meal that Jesus had with his disciples before his trial and execution, described in the Gospels. Famous painting of that scene by Italian painter Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519)
4. 'the thin red line': an expression of heroic resistance, or heroic battle, a few soldiers in red uniforms, so few that they can form only a thin line, fighting against the enemy. - A dictionary says: 'The old 93rd Highlanders were so described at the battle of Balaclava by Dr. W. H. Russell, because they did not take the trouble to form into square. "Balaclava" is one of the honour names on their colours, and their regimental magazine is named The Thin Red Line.'
5. Ave, Anne, morituri te salutant : Welcome, oh year, we who are doomed to die greet you. The original expression is: 'Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant' = 'We salute you, Caesar, we who are about to die'. This is how the gladiators would greet the emperor before the public sword fighting spectacles in which one of each pair had to die.
6. Cockburn (no, we do not say "cock"): In a famous TV advertisement for Cockburn a foreigner is told that the 'ck' in the name is not pronounced. We say 'co-burn'.
7. Sandeman, Burmester, Cockburn, Offley, Dow, Croft, Ferreirinha: famous brands of port wine. They have their warehouses on the left bank of the river Douro in Porto,

Portugal.

8. Domus Justitiae : High Court
9. schoolmarm = 'school madam'; somebody with all the negative attributes of a female school teacher, pedantic, boring, old-fashioned, prim, prudish, strictly adhering to arbitrary rules
10. steppled: not a standard English word. Here it means: came in with many small steps, walked with mincing gait
11. AMOR VINCIT OMNIA : Love conquers everything. Latin proverb. 'Omnia vincit amor, et nos cedamus amori' (Love conquers everything, therefore we too should surrender to love). Virgil (70-19 BC): Eclogues X, 69.
12. DAVINCIT: means nothing in Latin. Pun on the name of Leonardo Davinci.
13. Hollow women: T S Eliot wrote a poem called 'The Hollow Men'. The poem ends:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.
14. 'Working girls': English euphemism for 'prostitutes'.
15. Kuwait, Iraq: reference to Gulf War of 1991
16. glutton, winebibber (drunkard): Matthew 11:19: 'The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.'
17. Psallite...: From medieval Christmas carols: Sing, chant, praise, may the heavens resound in praises, may all the world be joyful.
18. Belles de Nuit = beauties of the night; Title of a 1952 film directed by René Clair
19. On the Pope's attack of migraine, See Osservatore Romano, 20 Dec. 1999, p 666, Col 2 (Spoof note!) - In the event the Pope did visit Fatima on 13 May 2000.
20. SIDA = AIDS
21. Condone: this misspelling is deliberate! Pun.
to condone = to forgive;
condom = French: préservatif

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22. Foz: suburb of Porto
 23. 'went off to a man'; deliberate linguistic contortion. 'went off to a man' = all of them, without a single exception, went off. This is what a translation must say if it cannot imitate the English joke. - Distortion: sirens are not men. In Greek mythology they are bewitching females singing irresistibly. (Then they became alarm machines.) Therefore they cannot really go off 'to a man'.
 24. This is the way the millennium came: see note on 'Hollow women', above.
 25. 'the last trumpet': Traditionally understood to be the divine signal for the end of the world and God's last judgement, doomsday. Source: 'Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.' (Bible, New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52)
 26. 10 Sep 2001: The next day, 11 Sep 2001, was the date on which the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York, and the Pentagon in Washington were attacked by terrorist planes.
 27. 'Baudrillard and the Reality Gulf': Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), French philosopher, wrote an infamous article in which he claimed that the Gulf War of 1991 (Kuwait, Iraq, USA) did not take place and that it did not matter whether it did or not ('The reality gulf', in: The Guardian, London, 11 January 1991, p 25). All the war preparations were nothing but a media circus. We could not tell the library pictures on television from recordings of real events. Nobody could be sure whether the actual war had started. Therefore there was no war and there would be no war. There were only television pictures, which bore no relation to reality. Modern wars are fought on TV screens, not on the battle field: they are propaganda wars. Baudrillard did not mean this as a joke, he was serious about it. His arguments have been analysed by Christopher Norris in his book: 'Uncritical Theory'.

By the same token one might argue today (6 Oct 2001, still prior to American military action) that everything relating to the terrorist attacks in America, the blowing up of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the destruction, the scenes of bereavement, the anti-terrorist measures, war preparations, shuttle diplomacy, arrests of suspected terrorists, ..., all the news and discussion broadcasts, are nothing but a soap opera, a MULTI-media show, ingeniously, put on by the media in

such a way that they all report, without a single exception about the same 'fictitious reality' (the same script), even though from different angles. The novelty being that ALL the media, TV, newspapers, radio, in every country of the world, are participating in the conspiracy. No diverging (true) information can be had from anywhere. Even the divergent political opinions and debates are part of the same script.

I (Klaus Bung) do, of course, strongly disagree with the validity of Baudrillard's ridiculous conclusions, i.e. that there is no longer any distinction between fiction and reality. For me this does not cogently follow from the true observation that sometimes or often it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from deception, and that sometimes it is impossible.

28. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Boston, Mass., is not far from there.
29. 'interpretive community': term invented or popularised by literature guru Stanley Fish, who claims that meaning is not inherent in a text, that there is no 'true interpretation' of a text, but 'true' (about a text) is what is accepted among a group of like-minded people (interpretive community), and that all interpretations are equally valid, no matter how far apart they are from each other or 'from the text'. Fish, like Baudrillard, therefore denies the existence of 'truth' or the usefulness of the concept of 'truth'.
30. Flight 175, intended to fly from Boston, Mass., to Los Angeles, was diverted by the hijackers and crashed into the World Trade Center in New York.
31. a trifle: less than 2 years in 1000 years, i.e. less than 0.2%
32. the horsemen: the four horsemen of the apocalypse (New Testament, Book of Revelation (Offb.), ch. 6). They bring war, famine and pestilence. Famous woodcut by German painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).
33. scythe: symbol of death. Death cuts people down like a mower.
34. millennium bug: The term was originally used to describe the computer failures which people feared would occur on 1 January 2000, if computers could not cope with dates greater than 1999. These nightmares never came true. - 'bug' means originally an insect, a beetle, a small organism. The word was then also used for errors in computer programs which cause the programs to malfunction. - The millennium bugs in the story are

agents used in biological warfare: bacteria, viruses, spores, ... anthrax... Around 7 Oct 2001 two incidents of anthrax in humans (so far one death) were already being investigated by the FBI.

35. They knew neither the day nor the hour. (Matth. 25:13)

^ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Klaus Bung was born in Germany but has spent most of his life in England. He studied at Cambridge (England) University. He is widely travelled (all over Europe; USA, Canada, Philippines, Iraq, Kenya) and speaks many Western European languages. He now devotes himself to writing fiction and poetry. Apart from over eighty academic publications, he has published 'creative' work in DIPIKA (London), SCAVENGER (Osage City, Kansas, USA), WRITERS' FORUM (Bournemouth, UK), THE WORLD OF ENGLISH (Peking), PPHOO Magazine (Calcutta), to name but a few. He has been a member of the Society of Authors (London) since 1967.

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