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# Totalitarian Lust: From *Salò* to *Abu Ghraib*

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## 1. THE BASTILLE

IN HIS *DIRECTORIUM INQUISITORUM*, a 1503 treatise on inquisitorial interrogations and tortures, Nicolau Eimeric formulated a golden rule. According to this theologian, torture should never be conceived simply as an arbitrary game of cruelty nor as an institutionally sanctioned crime to be committed in God's name. On the contrary, the techniques and instruments of torture are specifically and rationally dependent on an ultimate transcendental value; and it is precisely this interior significance of torture that bestows on the torturer the highest theological dignity. In this manner, Eimeric voiced his radical opposition to the common interrogational practice of breaking the bones of "defenseless people," since this practice lacked any rational function. He proposed, rather, the use of technologies that were bound to socially relevant individuals, such as doctors, soldiers, and priests who practiced heresy. In these cases, torture was to be designed according to principles that were theologically differentiated for each class of dogmatic transgression. Torture, in sum, was to be considered an instrument of spirituality; as well it should be to this day.<sup>1</sup>

To reduce torture epistemologically to the category of a pure technological problem, or to confine it sociologically to corrupt administrations and tyrannical political systems, or yet again to restrict it juridically according to some more or less virtuous, more or less virtual principle of human rights: all of this and its like exposes nothing but the desire to misunderstand torture. Torture is one among many expressions of human dominance. It therefore needs to be considered in relation to other contemporary manifestations of the power of the modern state: for example, the technical-scientific destruction of ecosystems; the economic strategies of global genocide; or programs for nuclear and biological extermination. And yet torture is not one more among these various forms and instruments of civilizing domination. Torture is the most privileged spiritual expression of this power.

It would be similarly mistaken to trivialize torture as collateral damage or as the undesired consequence of cleanly operating apparatuses of political or military domination, be they fascist or neo-liberal. The methods and instruments of torture should be understood, rather, as means of central importance because they reveal the sub-structures of the moral, epistemological, and political systems that put torture into practice. This is then perhaps the place to recall two classic interpretations of torture. “Die Waffen sind nichts anderes, als das Wesen der Kämpfer selber,” wrote G.W.F. Hegel in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Weapons are the essence of their bearers; they reveal the nature of the rational consciousness of the civilization that uses them; and they make manifest the significance of the bloody spirit of universal history.<sup>2</sup> Torture is the intimate expression—the erotic and charismatic expression—of the logos of domination. It is for this reason that it is concealed. The other interpretation to have in mind here is *In der Straflkolonie*, where Franz Kafka describes the tortured body as a surface on which the rational system of the law is encoded, thus defining the concentration camp as a metaphor of modern civilization.

Torture is a microcosm. Hence, its considerable theological, philosophical, and political value. The physical and chemical techniques of destruction of the person—from the grappling irons and mutilations put into practice by the Holy Christian Brotherhood, to the electrical charges, drugs, violent contusions, prolonged asphyxia, aggressive sensorial stimulation, and sexual violation practiced in centers of military intelligence throughout the Cold War—in short, what we see before us today, is not, as the institutional watchdogs of human rights are inclined to proclaim, the vision of an inexpressible and incomprehensible horror. It is the exact opposite: the calculated expression, at once rational and necessary, that defines modernity, the global capitalist system, or Western civilization as such. This is the expression that reveals the profound logos of modernity. It is, to be precise, the same expression that once led the Marquis de Sade to explore, in his memories of imprisonment, the nexus between torture and civilizing rationality.

The literary configuration of sadist torture in *Les 120 journées de Sodome* is particularly revealing given our contemporary panorama of wars, genocides, and the humiliating mockery of the globalized electronic masses. First of all, the criminal intent of Sade’s imaginary secret societies forced them into a situation of social exclusion and legal defiance, which Sade represented metaphorically by means of the mystical image of a fortified castle hidden far away in an inaccessible place. But Sade did not formulate the secretive confinement of his libertines as a negative

condition and necessary punishment for participating in criminal associations. His use of extra-territoriality did not delimit an illegal or irregular situation from either a juridical or moral point of view. On the contrary, he used it to define metaphorically a state of exception on the basis of which the legal and moral order of a rational and revolutionary system of domination might be constituted. In this regard, Sade's libertines are the instruments that execute the final moral and political consequence of the philosophical and historical reason of the *Grande Revolution*: the same rationality that instituted the guillotine and the revolutionary dictatorship of Robespierre: the same rationality that erected the sacrificial altars of liberty and threw open the doors to the Napoleonic wars: the same rationality, in sum, that inaugurated a new era of colonial usurpation, exploitation, and genocide. This violence configures the new rational republican order in the same sense that the political theories of Thomas Hobbes or Carl Schmitt treated a state of exception as a condition for the establishment of a totalitarian state.<sup>3</sup> And it is in this sense also that today we pay witness to a process of military expansion and domination that has culminated in the public torture and extermination of prisoners of war at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.

The moral exemplarity and juridical function of the sadist libertines explains the redundant affection that Sade attaches to logical rigor, to geometric order, to strict norms and formal hierarchies. What is more, the moral and juridical function that Sade assigns to his libertines also explains the visualization and vigilance of their criminal acts or performances. And it explains as well the punctilious praise for a system of total administrative control that indiscriminately includes both the moral conduct and the pleasure-seeking of victims and their victimizers alike.<sup>4</sup> For this reason also, the secret sadist society is a visionary anticipation of the totalitarian organization inherent to contemporary global military and political bureaucracies, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno noted some time ago in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Sade's philosophy does more than explain the legally constituting function of violence that either precedes or remains beyond the law. Sade was not an ideologue. Nor was he a theorist of the modern or postmodern totalitarian state. His literary work, rather, underscores the logical and epistemological premises as well as the politico-economic and moral consequences of the new political and metaphysical order of the Revolution. By means of tediously repetitive performances of criminal pleasure and the industrial rationalization of rape, torture, and crime, Sade reveals the logical sub-structure of the simultaneously liberal and totalitarian, enlightened and destructive, progressive and apocalyptic system of modern civilization.

There are two fundamental characteristics that define the spiritual and civilizing significance of torture. One is political. In extremely crude terms, it can be formulated as the criminal exemplarity with which certain sectors that are at the vanguard of political and military organization of a legal state publicly proclaim their own seditious power as the source of a new *de facto* local or global order. It is for this reason that torture—whether of the sort practiced during the colonial Inquisition of the Sixteenth century or of the kind practiced in the colonial penitentiaries of the current Global War—must hide its primitive, bloody, and sacrificial brutality from society while, at the same time, making sure to exhibit itself as a public demonstration of a power that is as absolute as it is arbitrary. The case of Giordano Bruno, who was subjected over six years to interrogations and torture in the secret prisons of the Vatican only to be burned alive at the stake after his tongue had been removed, illustrates this doubly archaic dimension of torture. But in its exemplary old inquisitorial form as well as in the technically dignified form it has achieved today under the sway of the new theology of totalitarianism, torture also reveals a theological characteristic: it exposes the ultimate reason and final consequences of lofty doctrines such as the universal redemption of mankind by means of ecclesiastic conversion (Paul), or by means of economic development and the cultivation of democracy as a spectacle (which are the theological ends of the colonial wars of the twenty-first century).

On the basis of these theological and political characteristics, Sade's work provides a primordial revelation: the very same rationality that once sustained the enlightened republican ideals of liberty and equality served to perpetuate the nihilistic significance of Christian morality and its crystallization in the apparatus of the state. Oppression and destruction, rape, violation, humiliation: these were its final rational postulates. It is in this sense that *Les 120 journées de Sodome* anticipates the so-called "dialectic of enlightenment," the Janus-faced grimace of a revolutionary rationality that simultaneously incorporates a totalitarian political and military machinery and a genocidal principle of annihilation.

## 2. SALÒ

*Salò, o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini, is first and foremost the intellectual testimony of an age of imperialist wars, mass media abuse, and genocide.<sup>6</sup> The film specifically narrates the practices of sexual violation, torture, and execution carried out by fascist European

states during the wars of the 1940s. But Pasolini does more than document a real case of organized crime: he juxtaposes it to a critique of late-modern civilization as a totalitarian system. In addition to providing this political perspective on the ecclesiastical organization of state-sanctioned crime, *Salò* provides a denunciation of the moral nihilism that impregnates the modern philosophy of Sade, Nietzsche, or Klossowski, and it does so precisely by using these thinkers' most critical philosophical illuminations. Pasolini denounces this modern nihilism by placing philosophical citations in the mouths of the fascist victimizers in his film. Interestingly, these victimizers are surrounded by a décor that pays homage to the sacred icons of the Futurist vanguard, from Fernand Léger to Carlo Carrá. Thus *Salò* provides a denunciation of torture; but at the same time it interprets torture as the secret writing of a modernity that legitimizes and disseminates torture as a language. Last but not least, this film also announces the coming of a new global fascism: the global fascism that is staring us in the face today.

This important film presents four definitions of torture or, rather, four aspects of its institutional practice. To begin with, *Salò* describes torture as lust, linking it to destruction, humiliation, and sacrificial death. In effect, Pasolini stages the Holy Trinity of libidinal excitation, sexual violation, and murder and combines these three moments with narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence. He treats these as the signs of that same collapse of humanity that Freud had announced decades before in his diagnosis of modernity as a culture of violence. With its final sequence of scenes, *Salò* highlights this collapse, offering images of women and men who have been violated and mutilated in a macabre dance of absolute power.

The second definition provided by this film associates torture with freedom. To be more exact, *Salò* defines torture as the supreme expression of freedom. There simply is no moral ideal of sovereignty, irregardless of how paranoid or absolute its will-to-power may be, that can express with greater transparency the emancipation of the self from any and all legal or political fetters; there is no better expression of independence from human customs and norms; no clearer expression of a hegemony that recognizes no limits to its technical and imaginative prowess; there is, in the final analysis, no principle of domination that can be applied in a manner that is so innocent, so absolute, and so impeccable as occurs in the relation of the torturer and his victim. As one of the libertines of Pasolini's film proclaims, it is only through torture that the transcendental liberty of techno-scientific and moral reason can be realized both as a fantasy of omnipotence and as the lust for a true *an-arkhia* (the state prior to the law and constitutive of the law).

The third meaning of torture developed in *Salò* is aesthetic. But perhaps it would be more accurate to speak here of the multiple aesthetic functions of torture. In this regard, it might also be useful to recall the profuse imagery of violations and mutilations, massive bombings and assassinations that distinguish the little screen of the global village in these final years of transition toward the new world order of the twenty-first century. This aesthetic dimension, or more precisely this performative dimension, merits special attention.

In Sade's *Les 120 journées*, torture and assassination were presented in the format of a baroque setting. These were crimes perpetrated in order to be seen; the libertine as actor and the reader as voyeur participated equally in the resulting pleasure. Pasolini takes up this spectacular dimension. And he does so under a variety of aspects. The aestheticization of horror is one of these. The exemplary genocide of *Salò* takes place in an elegant Palladian villa, decorated with many of the masterpieces of the artistic vanguards. The ambience is decidedly refined, literary, philosophical. In this sense, the film anticipates the aestheticization of horror today through mediated *mise en scènes*: the victims of Guantánamo clinically uniformed in orange suits, transported in stretchers to their torture cells, a somber spectacle that condenses genocidal violence into the clinical precision of instruments of advanced biotechnology.

Still, Pasolini also treats this aestheticization of terror in another sense: he duplicates it reflexively. Reconstructing the scenes of torture as a play within a play, and using the procurers as sadist narrators, he surreptitiously introduces that same distance and defamiliarization (*Befremdung*) with regard to the representation that Brecht had formulated as a means to artistic clarity. This reflexive duplication in Pasolini's movie engages in a polemical fashion with the two most elemental characteristics of the representation of violence in the global village: first, the fictionalization, neutralization, and evaporation of the reality of violence; and second, the hyper-realistic and pornographic exaltation of violence (pornographic, that is, in the sense of the pornographic industry of crime, sexual sadism, and violence that characterizes the Hollywood aesthetic). By reason of this defamiliarizing, reflexive, and clarifying function, Pasolini's *Salò* was, and continues to be, a prohibited film; unlike the pornography and violence currently produced by the globalizing mass media.

The fourth meaning of torture examined by *Salò* is political and civilizing. It concerns the constitution of a totalitarian power. In this respect, it proves useful to remember that *Salò* provides a vision akin to the one that Kafka develops in his *Strafkolonie*. In both instances, torture is revealed as a kind of coded writing on the bodies of the victims;

the torturers derive pleasure from writing this secret coded language, which is in effect an inaugural system of oppressive norms that gives rise to an ideal totalitarian society. From the first to the last images of his film, Pasolini shows—and in this sense he is faithful to the example of Sade—the intimate relation between torture on the one hand and, on the other, ecclesiastic morality, military machinery, and financial power. Or, to put it more precisely, Pasolini demonstrates how torture is the interior dimension of the neutral and autonomous machinery of fear and trembling, according to which political philosophy, from Hobbes to Schmitt, has defined the modern absolutist and totalitarian state.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. THE CIVILIZING PROCESS

*Salò* is interesting not only in the sense that it denounces the crimes of historical fascism, but also because it anticipates the fascism which yesterday belonged to tomorrow, as Barth David Schwartz points out in his biography of Pasolini.<sup>8</sup> Torture as totalitarian lust; torture as an expression of liberty, sovereignty, and imperial power; torture as a spectacle and the encoded language of power: these are the contemporary dimensions of torture as an instrument of civilization.

Pasolini described this instrumental function of torture by means of the architecture of initiation that structures his film: *Salò* is divided into a series of successive “circles” through which the victims must pass on their way to their final sacrificial consummation. These circles allude to Dante’s *Inferno*, and as occurs in the *Commedia*, the significance of their content is allegorical. The first of these circles, the “Girone delle manie,” stages an artificial system of stimuli and constant lustful excitement. This system is replete with the most extreme fantasies and incentives, from masturbation to execution. It is however a system of incitation and excitation that generates increasing gradations of frustration; this frustration, in turn, leads the victimizers and their victims alike to embrace a destructive and self-destructive aggression. It is with this metaphor that Pasolini concludes his first critique of neo-liberal and postmodern fascism: a provocative system of consumption, which, regardless of whether it is dedicated to sexual trafficking, the corporate production of ecologically devastating seeds, or trafficking in arms, generates progressive degrees of violence, the exponential growth of hunger, epidemics, death, and the indefinite expansion of war.

In the next circle, the “Girone della merda,” Pasolini exposes the necessary consequence of this first capitalist cycle of libidinal hyper-excitation,

frustrating emotional discharges, and the subsequent accumulation of lethal energy. As unarmed spectators, we behold this new circle unable to cope with the final degradation of humanity. The film stylizes this degradation poetically, with successive scenes of the military imposition of a collective suicide, and images of people swallowing blades, crouching in humiliation, and feverishly gulping down their own excrement.

Blood is the last of the circles of initiation to a totalitarian civilization. With this symbol, which is at once vital and sacrificial, *Salò* represents torture as a process of mutilation of the organs of erotic union and biological generation. At issue is a kind of torture that is simultaneously political and sexual: precisely the sort of torture that the fascist regimes of the so-called Cold War in Colombia, Chile, or Argentina practiced and that continues to be practiced under the auspices of torture's new setting—the “War on Terror.” This blood symbolism also designates torture as a paradigm for the terminal destruction of the human being. Yet Pasolini adds to this another ingredient of considerable relevance to the industrial and mediated culture of the twenty-first century: the trivialization of human pain and agony by means of violent, destructive, and lethal spectacles. This is Pasolini's conclusion concerning totalitarian lust.

The final sequence of scenes in *Salò* is particularly enlightening in this regard. In a prison that is open to the skies above, the victims are subjected to mutilations and tortures that are lethal. But one of the libertines contemplates this deathly scene from an enclosed balcony and through the double prism of a set of binoculars. The camera reproduces this privileged perspective, highlighting in a detailed close-up the expressions of desperation and discouragement of the victims' faces. The screams of the victims cannot be heard, however. Instead, a sacred exaltation of sensuality, eroticism, and beauty plays in the background; it is Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Suddenly, the libertine inverts the position of his binoculars. The camera shifts from distant and diluted images of mutilated bodies to an intimate and clean image of the libertine being masturbated by one of his soldiers. The film shows this voyeuristic and masturbatory victimizer seated with his back to the camera. He is, consequently, an anonymous viewer. His narrative function is identitarian. He represents the spectator of mass media. He is us. Pasolini reconstructs this electronic “us” as an accomplice of a self-destructive power.

The spiritual constitution of this mediated collective consciousness in the era of the global war is distinguished by three characteristics. First: the fictionalization of reality. With Abu Ghraib, this mediated trivialization of reality has reached the extreme of jumbling the photographs of the real victims together with images produced and distributed by the

industry of pornography. Such a hybridization of fiction and reality does not only signify the weakening of reality in the sense of “la guerre qu’na en lieu.” Of much greater importance is the profound dimension of this semiotic exchange of simulacra and representations: the linguistic, moral, and libidinal continuity of, on the one hand, the consumption of electronic pornography by the masses and, on the other, the totalitarian lust of torture and assassination on a massive scale that plays itself out every evening on prime-time television.

Abu Ghraib is a symbol of the civilizing process in an age of spectacles in still another sense: its fragmented spaces; the deformation and de-personalization of its victims; the signs of a military terror which, in part, exhibits its hyper-modern technocratic efficiency and, in part, demonstrates the schizophrenic structure of a power that shifts forms, generates schizoid subjects, and provokes rationally uncontrollable conduct. It is what Michel Foucault announced in his welcoming salutation to Gilles Deleuze’s *Anti-Oedipe* as a deleuzian era yet to come.

The third and final aspect that crystallizes around this voyeur of *Salò*—this voyeur that is us—results directly from the previous two: the electronic evaporation and schizophrenic deconstruction of reality. At issue is our own collective state of catatonic rigidity, intellectual and emotional coldness, and practical as well as communicative lack of validity. It is a generalized state of somnambulism, in which it becomes impossible to comprehend the reality of the spectacle and construct meaning out of our damaged existence.

## NOTES

1. Nicolau Eymereich, Francisco Peña. *Le manuel des inquisiteurs* (Paris: Mouton Éditeur, 1973), 207 and following.

2. G. W. F. Hegel. *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*. A: 320.

3. S. Carl Schmitt. *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 1963), 34 etc. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.), 30 etc.

4. The Marquis de Sade. *The 120 days of Sodom, and Other Writings*. Compiled and translated by Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 240 etc.

5. Max Horkheimer und Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969), 88.

6. Pier Paolo Pasolini. *Salò, the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975).

7. Carl Schmitt. *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 51.

8. Barth David Schwartz. *Pasolini Requiem* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 637.