



allegorical scene

Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1955

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The Body of a Political Masochist: Torture, Performance and Power in Elias Maglinis' *The Interrogation*

In November 2013 Russian conceptual artist Petr Pavlensky nailed his testicles to the icy cobbles of the Red Square in Moscow and sat there until the police and health services intervened. This protest/performance act rounded off a politically inspired “trilogy” that over two years involved various methods of body brutalization. The two performances preceding this one were a rather obvious act of Pavlensky’s sewing his lips shut, in protest at the incarceration of *Pussy Riot* members and the silencing of Russian dissidents, while the other one had him lying naked in a roll of barbed wire in front of the Legislative Assembly, in protest of Russian censorship, the notorious anti-gay legislation and a few other recent controversial laws.¹ Resorting to such excruciating performances was part of his many attempts at drawing attention as much to the complacency with which contemporary Russians tolerate the corruption and bureaucratic impenetrability of Vladimir Putin’s rule, as Pavlensky’s own reaction as an artist to the commodification and mainstreaming of art in contemporary society. Each one of Pavlensky’s performances ended in his arrest, while the first one had him sent for psychiatric evaluation. Each time, likewise, he was released with no charges, while the psychiatric evaluations found nothing in Pavlensky’s behavior that could be potentially interesting for the science. He struck again in October 2014, when he cut off one of his ears while sitting naked on the wall of a Moscow psychiatric hospital. This response was bringing into focus the government’s rehashing of Soviet-era use of psychiatric diagnoses for the purpose of neutralizing dissidents. In Pavlensky’s own words, self-muti-

lation in his political art is “the imitation of the visual code” of the “philosophy of endless carnage” perpetuated by the systems of power.² Violence is the medium through which the establishment communicates and violence is the only language it understands. The body thus becomes the artist’s best resource for the graphic translation of this unequal exchange but also the one that Pavlensky thinks is the most understandable to the majority of people, who are afraid to react against routine regime violence and instead willingly subject to it. In Pavlensky’s words, resounding with ominous Foucauldianisms, “It’s not the power that keeps people by the balls, it’s the people who keep themselves restricted. Pretty soon everyone’s going to be in jail, but it won’t matter to anybody anymore.”³

Problems implied in Pavlensky’s statement, but also by others who have used their body as medium for the awakening of others to their masochistic bondage to power (no pun intended) can be summed up as follows: how radical a response does body art expect from its spectators: can it make a connection between the ubiquitous violence in *real* life and its reenactment in performance and whether this connection can elicit any meaningful reaction on the part of those whose awakening is sought, or whether it will remain within the limits of a visual spectacle; can the performance artist create a community among spectators and be the instrument of their awareness? Ultimately, however, it all boils down to whether the spectators/witnesses ever really *want* this new awareness, replete with the vast possibilities it opens before them – or, whether they prefer to avoid harm by continuing to ignore their own unfreedom, as Pavlensky fears.

The impermanent nature of performance art makes it an improbable subject of fiction, and indeed counting attempts to fictionalize it would yield hardly any results. However, one of few texts written in any language that has as its subject the matter of performing bodies is *The Interrogation*, a novel by Elias Maglinis published in 2008. In this small and fast paced book, that is less a narrative than a collection of powerful visuals, where body is brutalized, exposed, sexualized and dissected as much by actions as by language, Maglinis managed to squeeze in many questions about the complexity of the individual’s relation to history/politics and the choice of one’s loud protestation against it or silent resignation with it. *The Interrogation* overflows with blood, body mutilation, undigested food, torture and masochistic sexual experimentation. One of its two main protagonists is

Marina, a young aspiring artist modeled on the famous Yugoslav performance artist Marina Abramović, the self-proclaimed “grandmother” of performance art. The fictional Marina of *Interrogation* embarks on a mission to liberate her father Kostis from his nightmarish family history of victimization in the unstable Greek political landscape. Political persecution acts like a genetic disease in Marina’s family, with her communist grandfather tortured, imprisoned, and banished during the civil war, while her father underwent systematic beating and rape in the prisons of the military junta. The novel treats human bodies as malleable raw material on which historical and private trauma leave debilitating impressions, but also as the only mediums for the conquest of freedom and any length of individual space. Perhaps the most important question it asks is whether individual freedom is achieved through a decisive confrontation with the agents and causes of trauma or whether the only way forward for a wounded individual is healing based on reconciliation and acceptance of one’s past. The exhibitionism of Marina’s self-mutilation with which she assaults her family and audiences is thus in stark contrast with the compromise Kostis made with the trauma he survived by withdrawing both from his family and society. The novel is embedded into specific events from Greek history and translates the friction between the characters’ different approaches to trauma into the lack of consensus with which the Greek nation as a whole views its own past as a foundation towards a more inclusive future.

The Interrogation treats the bodies of its protagonists as the ultimate instrument and measure of all things, in a very Foucauldian sense of blank surfaces scarred or “inscribed by history,” which ultimately destroys them.⁴ Everything in this household revolves about the body, which functions as a memo pad of events and a calendar of milestones that coincide with various stages of its disintegration: Marina’s mother Rhea is in a terminal phase of cancer during the final chapter of her divorce from Kostis; her dead body activates uncontrollable bouts of overeating in Marina; Kostis remembers happier days of their family life from scars on Rhea’s skin. Marina herself appears to be affected by this history of corporeal violation as from a very early age she demonstrates an affinity for bodily harm and self-inflicted pain. Her family is apparently clueless as to the causes of this brutal treatment of her own body, her violent outbursts in public or her alienating performance acts. Her whole life revolves inside the debilitating cycle of the

foods and nourishment she rejects, the erratic pattern of her menstrual cycle, and nauseating migraines. Both the real and the fictional artist blame physiological problems on the unsettled family situation—Abramović implies that the source of somewhat similar conditions she suffered in her adolescence was the absence in her life of her father and the iron discipline she was subjected to by her strong and commanding mother. In most of her political performances, where she exhibited her body as a sacrificial offering to ideology, Abramović made a very clear connection between her family and social repression of which they were partaking.⁵ Marina of *Interrogation*, on the other hand, does not declare any particular reason behind her masochism while her performances exhibit less focus on specific political issues and instead concentrate on world injustices in general. But both her life and her art demonstrate an intuitive awareness of her family's complicity in the social violence that took its toll on all of them. With her body slashing and blood spilling she is constantly trying to provoke some meaningful reaction from her father, whom she accuses of silence and passivity in the face of his past suffering. A new performance act she plans to organize would thus be the first one with a clear focus on Kostis' victimization. It also becomes a pretext for her insistence on hearing the account of the torture he was subjected to in prison, which is the one topic he stubbornly refuses to discuss with her.

Her methods of inquiry into his past and his family legacy however are as intrusive of the privacy and silence behind which he has been hiding all her life, as they are disrespectful of what she thinks are his salon leftist sympathies:

"I want to know, dad. That's all. And I want you to finally stand up and let it all out.

"Marina, do you understand what you are doing?"

"Yes, I'm trying to help you heal."

[...]

I've been asking you questions all my life, trying to talk to you, and you've never given me a direct answer to anything. You just don't answer; you never answered anything. You know something? Granddad would have talked to me, dad. Granddad would have talked. Granddad had guts. I'm really sorry I never got to meet him. Unlike you, granddad actually had balls.

(Maglinis, 82-86)

Marina perceives the seemingly quiet and undisturbed family existence they performed together like a smokescreen against the exposure to the outside world. She doubts Kostis' political activism to his face, but a more pressing question troubles her in recurring incestuous nightmares, where she dreams of her father's inability to sexually please a woman and produce male offspring. Her pressing interrogation and her public performances that Kostis feels devalue his sacrifice, challenge both her father's and the authority vested on the patriarchal family in general. What is ultimately at stake in this interrogation is the social structure as we know it, the "dominant fiction," as Kaja Silverman defines the belief in the "unity of the family and the adequacy of the male subject."⁶ It is precisely the sense of Kostis' *inadequacy* as the male subject that pervades the novel and makes clear that the social construct is entirely built on a collective belief in the power of the phallus, which despite all the Lacanian veils and implausible interpretations, in the final analysis and for most purposes, *does* signify the penis. Marina's identification with Kostis' inadequacy likewise precludes her "becoming" as a properly "female subject," in the sense defined by Rosi Braidotti, who deplores the predominance in theoretical discourse of the Lacanian approach to subjectivity that reads women as "melancholic" and unfinished subjects.⁷ Maglinis' novel speaks directly to such androcentric interpretations, as all Marina's endeavors are directed at empowering her site of social identification with the discourse of untainted masculinity. Her very existence depends on her successful rehabilitation of her *father* as her progenitor and his phallus as a signifier of her own social participation. This is why of all other methods of torture Kostis was subjected to, it is rape that puts under the microscope both his symbolic phallic powers as well as his biological masculinity, and renders him doubly "castrated."

In his large body of work on power and various methods of disciplining the body, Foucault has nothing in particular to say about rape that is outside his known format of power vs. subject. Although unrelated to sexuality, itself a method of control, rape emerges as apparently indistinct from other methods of torture, which he claims, "revealed truth and showed the operation of power. [...] it made possible to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal; the same horror had to be manifested and annulled."⁸ The *truth* that Foucault mentions is what Elaine Scarry later reinterprets as *fiction* that torture creates about the violator's purported authority over the body of the victim. Scarry, who is similarly mum on the specificities of rape, discusses tor-

ture as a sadistically intimate relationship between the torturer and the victim that converts “absolute pain into fiction of absolute power.”⁹ This power is recognized as genuine by neither perpetrator nor victim; nevertheless it tends to establish itself as indisputable on the basis of the pain it inflicts and visible traces it leaves on the victim’s body. Torture could thus be interpreted as the violent transgression against the body that for the tortured uncovers the Lacanian *Real*, as devoid of substance as it is unrepresentable in the symbolic order “except by its effects.”¹⁰

Rape is perpetrated with this same idea of establishing fictional (masculine, dominant and even reproductive) authority. Rape of male bodies additionally implies a very calculated *degradation* of the male body, forcing the victim to embody the subjugated gendered role and thwarting his resistance. The fact that physical disfiguration from torture scarred Kostis less than the memory of repetitive rape likewise speaks to the socially fuelled belief in the authority of untainted masculinity. Rape left the most profound impact not only on Kostis’ psyche but also on the way his family perceives him – or, at least in the way *he* projects his own humiliation on his wife and daughter, fearing that they both constantly interrogate his virility. He is also deeply suspicious that Marina’s interest in his confession does not go much further from the sexual aspect of torture, as she seems to ignore the deep psychological trauma he suffered and concentrates merely on its corporeal aspects. Even occasional appearances in the narrative of his estranged and deceased wife Rhea merely affirms in Kostis’ mind the intimation of his unmanliness. All Kostis signifies is a painfully obvious *lack* that determines not merely his own social role but also Marina’s.

As Marina tries to establish *what* happened to Kostis, she never digs deeper into the *why* and neither does Kostis, who just wishes not to discuss this part of his life. That way they both avoid the trap that Claude Lanzmann calls the “obscenity of understanding,” inherent not merely in the psychoanalytical project but also, as he explored in his epic film *Shoah*, in commemorating the Holocaust as well as any other episode of extreme brutality. The attempts to rationalize trauma, to learn more about the criminal minds and plans behind it, according to Lanzmann, is merely an attempt to *give meaning* to something that is inherently meaningless, to understand the incomprehensible horror, and ultimately to rehabilitate what cannot be rehabilitated by putting a human face behind it.¹¹

Political Body, Masochistic Body

Marina directly translates the sadism of the torture Kostis suffered in prison into a brutal treatment to which she subjects her own body in private as much as in public performances. Her sexual masochism is likewise never really private but always precariously verging on the edge of exhibitionism staged for her father's accidental gaze. These episodes of painful self-mutilating masturbation take place in her father's home and with the door deliberately unsecured against Kostis' unintentional disruption, of which he is fully aware:

He had watched her do this once in the past, before losing her mother.

[...]

It could be a bad dream. It's not, but like in dreams he can't move or shout, even when he sees her yank at her nipples with thumb and forefinger. Her expressionless face in front of the mirror going crimson from the pain, a pain that's all hers: a swimmer trapped under a thin layer of ice that won't break no matter how much he yearns for the breath—a howling breath, a breathy howl—to let out a shriek like the one he lets out from the very depths of his being on those nights when he flails in his sleep thirsting for a bit, the tiniest bit, of oxygen.

It's only when he sees her sit at the edge of the bed, lie back, spread her legs wide and tear hatefully at the tender folds nestled between them, that he is finally able to stir. No longer a pillar of salt, he's not watching Sodom burn; he's witnessing his daughter self-mutilate, and so he distances himself from the horror of the half-open door without turning to look back.

(Maglinis, 2)

In their groundbreaking, albeit a bit outdated, definitions of masochistic practices Freud as well as Reik and Krafft-Ebing before him recognized masochism as a sexual perversion.¹² Freud, whose persuasive analysis influenced further work on the subject, most notably that by Deleuze, discusses masochism in a particular form, as taking place between the phallic mother and the son who submits to her punishment in a "feminine" fashion. The phallic mother punishing the disobedient son is furthermore merely a stand-in for the authoritative father who is in fact threatened by his son and, as would be expected of Freud, the entire setting does not move beyond the unresolved Oedipal crisis. Deleuze, who accepts the Freudian scenario of the interaction between mother and child, suggests that instead

of mother being a stand-in for the father it is in fact the child who assumes the father's role.¹³ The masochistic relationship thus takes place between the mother and the (exclusively male?) child, where the child being punished, as Gaylyn Studlar claims, "repudiates the father, the super-ego and Oedipal guilt."¹⁴ It is the ultimate fantasy in which the wronged mother will be avenged for the unhappiness caused her by the father and by the patriarchal symbolic he represents.

In *The Interrogation*, a much more significant undercurrent is the punitive relationship the protagonists have with their own bodies based on the expiation of some "historical" guilt. And this is where Maglinis' bodies and their physiological states abandon the personal and familial setting and turn into very public and signifying bodies of collective history. Marina's erratic menstrual cycle, Rhea's cancer, or Kostis' deformed legs are no longer their own, while the masochistic (dis)pleasure with which they watch their bodies being brutalized by proverbially overwhelming history belongs to the entire Greek nation. Ultimately, the very meaning of the term *masochism* changes when transferred from the sexual to the political: By definition the masochist controls the situation and directs how the pleasurable pain will be distributed by torture. S/he is thus in full command of the setting in which injury takes place. While this is usually the case in performative masochism, the body of what I call the "political masochist," however, cannot really make that decision individually.

The performative masochism of the kind found in the politically-informed work of Pavlensky, early Abramović, or ultimately, fictional Marina of the *Interrogation*, has little or nothing to do with sex *per se*. They all invoke the socio-political and familial causes as underlying their acts of self-inflicted mutilation, which reinforces the claim about the expiation of Oedipal guilt through punishment. What however distinguishes a radical performance piece from clinical masochism is that it rarely, if ever, involves expectance of sexual gratification. In fact, as Kathy O'Dell has discussed, most performative masochism tends to be devoid of pleasure whatsoever and instead its main connection with clinically defined masochism is its insistence on the *contract*, which likewise structures relationship between the masochist and the dominatrix/torturer in sexual masochism.¹⁵ Masochistic performances revive the actionism in performance arts characteristic mostly of the "radical" decades of the 1960s and the early '70s. In *Contract*

with the Skin O'Dell analyzes masochistic performances on the arts scene during these two decades and draws her conclusions on the iconic body acts by Chris Burden, Gina Pane or Vito Acconci, all of whom frequently tested the physical limits of body endurance and to an equal extent the contract between the performing artists and their audiences (or their onstage assistants). The nature of the contract itself was, according to O'Dell, brought into question by the politics of the decade that saw several new wars and interventionism in the post-WWII world, which severed the social agreements between the governments involved in military interventions and their populations. For O'Dell, the obvious point of reference is always the Vietnam War and the breach of contract between the US government and its citizens, in whose name the war was being waged. Needless to say, however, that internal US politics of the time teems with political violence of no less serious kind that could have been used as an even better reference point for such discussion, like the assassinations of M. L. King or J. F. Kennedy, or rampant racial violence that plagued the nation throughout these decades. Any masochistic performance by radical artists in that setting can almost automatically be assigned a political meaning, even when the performance itself is not overly politicized. Thus O'Dell contextualizes Burden's 1971 performance *Shoot*, in which his assistant shot him in the arm, as well as performances where other artists of the time were hurting, slashing, or in other ways mutilating or torturing their bodies, as masochism originating in the overall political circumstances and interrogating the very nature of the social contract:

Beyond its specifically legal function, the contract is a central metaphor in modern life, from the lease on a first home to the Republican Party's vaunted "Contract with America" of 1994. Masochistic performance artists of the 1970s, such as Burden, sought to call attention to the *structure of the contract* to emphasize that the real power of the agreement lies there. In this regard the artists followed a very basic premise: by pushing their actions to an extreme, they could dramatize the importance of a transaction that is often overlooked or taken for granted. (O'Dell, 2)

Some performance acts done by Marina Abramović at around this same time however are overtly politicized probes into the social context. Abramović's graphic body spectacles addressed her deepest fears and tested the limits of physical endurance, yet were rarely free from the ideological

dimension that lurks in the background and that has, she insists, circumscribed her life.¹⁶ In her now legendary *Rhythm 5* (1974) Abramović cut her hair and nails and threw them into a mix of woodchips and petroleum arranged in a wooden frame shaped into a five-pointed star, the symbol of socialist Yugoslavia and the centerpiece of the country's flag. She set it on fire and lay in its center. Seeing that she lost consciousness in the smoke that engulfed, her audience members carried her out, which she later resented.

In *The Lips of Thomas* (1975) Abramović used a razor blade to cut a five-pointed star across her belly, then whipped herself, lay down on a cross-shaped block of ice and bled profusely before the audience intervened fearing for her safety. The description of performance states the following:

LIPS OF THOMAS

Performance

I slowly eat 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon.

I slowly drink 1 liter of red wine out of a crystal glass.

I break the glass with my right hand.

I cut a five pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.

I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.

I lay /sic/ down on a cross made of ice blocks.

The heat of a suspended space heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed.

The rest of my body begins to freeze

I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes until the audience interrupts the piece by removing the ice blocks from underneath.

Duration: 2 hours 1975, Krinzinger Gallery, Innsbruck.¹⁷

Besides the obvious symbolic of the five-pointed star, with which Abramović suggests her own embeddedness into the structure of Yugoslav "communism," as she insists on calling it, she loaded the act with other, mostly autobiographical but nonetheless ideological symbolism: the cross, possibly suggesting her "martyrdom" to state ideology, but potentially even more so her descent from the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch, allegedly murdered in 1937 on political grounds. The excessive, almost sickening quantities of honey and wine consumed with a silver spoon and out of a crystal vessel, as well as the whip and blood, convey the hedonism attached to the upper social echelons (her parents as part of the communist regime),

but also an overload of sensations and clear masochistic pleasure in this act of sacrificial submission to the ideological symbolic. Despite the fact that the symbolism of this performance emerges from Abramović's biography and family mythology it demonstrates that this personal initiation ritual is always and necessarily only a fragment in a collective ideological experience. Yet in synthesizing the hedonistic pleasures of the (socialist) elites and the individual body overwhelmed by politico-historical narratives, Abramović denudes precisely what Marxism claims is the major problem of capitalism: the commodification of the reproductive (proletarian) body and its dissociation from natural pleasures of the senses and intellectual pleasures of the mind that remain accessible only to the elites through the mediation of capital.¹⁸

And this is where we arrive at a central point: whether these radical performances carry genuine potential for individual emancipation or alternatively, what kind of message they are intended to convey to the audiences regarding the breach or abuse of social contract by the powers that be. O'Dell denies such performances, no matter how radical, any explicit political dimension, by designating them simultaneously both socially relevant and depending on the political issues of the time. Her contention is that they are inherently incapable of mobilizing people to act on the issues that they problematize, and one of the reasons for this failure is that they basically alienate performer from audience.¹⁹ The artist who violates the integrity of her body in front of an audience is always there alone and in fact outside the emotional or cognitive reach by others. Consequently failing the possibility of conceiving a community that is by definition based on victimhood and sacrifice for the benefit of many. However, if this performative "sacrifice" is not presented in the interest of the community, for whose benefit or for whom is it performed at all?

In her discussion of body mutilation that contrasts incomparable practices of masochistic performance art and purportedly traditional female genital mutilation, Renata Salecl seeks to answer the question of how the subject defines itself in contemporary society (or, alternatively, is being defined by forced mutilation performed by and for the community). Salecl tends to see body mutilation in performance art as stemming from the disintegration of the traditional social network (patriarchal family) and the modified way in which the subject identifies with the symbolic law: "The law

is linked to the role of the father; and in taking a position against this law; that is, by distancing him or herself from this law, the modern subject acquires her or his ‘freedom’” (Salecl, 27). To go back to the classical definition of sexual masochism, body mutilation in performance art seems to offer a version of the original scenario between mother and child, save for the fact that there is no mother and the child, in fact punishes itself for the alleged guilt of the father(s). It would therefore be very tempting to conclude that the Oedipal structure clings so fast to body that subject can only liberate itself by flaying its skin, nailing the testicles in order to castrate the very signifier of social domination, or to sew the lips and refuse to speak in the language that constantly recreates the same repressive structure. Kaja Silverman talks about distinctions in how male and female masochisms were historically understood by psychoanalysis and concludes that the only one considered remotely subversive for the phallic structure was male masochism – perhaps precisely due to the fact that it targets patriarchy’s most sensitive spot and exposes its vulnerability and the inexplicable ease with which it can be desposed of, while female masochism merely reproduces socially sanctified gender roles:

What is it precisely that the male masochist displays, and what are the consequences of this self-exposure? To begin with, he acts out in an insistent and exaggerated way the basic conditions of cultural subjectivity, conditions that are normally disavowed; he loudly proclaims that his meaning comes to him from the Other, prostrates himself before the gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, and revels in the sacrificial basis of the social contract. The male masochist magnifies the losses and divisions upon which cultural identity is based, refusing to be sutured or recompensed. In short, he radiates a negativity inimical to the social order. (Silverman, 206)

But what do we make of non-male masochistic performances that demonstrate the potential to usurp power? What is the meaning of Abramović cutting herself in front of photos of her parents dressed in partisan guerilla uniform or Marina’s bloody exhibitions? Quite unsurprisingly these non-male protestations are not challenging the order but are intent on demonstrating that phallic power is in a state of dejected impotence (like Kostis), absent (like Abramović’s father), corrupt (Putin) and easy to decenter (only to be replicated by Abramović’s “phallic mother”). Rather than suggesting

that there is some inherent threat to the social order in male masochism, it is probably that male masochism (like Pavlensky mutilating his member as the very symbol of power) conforms to the female form of masochism that merely replicates gender submission to the law of the patriarch.

The ultimate goal of masochistic exhibitionism emerges as precisely the opposite of subversion. Self-mutilation that revolves around the phallus is no more revolutionary than the church sanctioned carnivalesque spectacle, whose ultimate goal cannot be further away from the actual overthrow of church power.²⁰ It is more a reaction to the “betrayal” of subject by the absolute authority and a recognition that direct and unmediated communication with it that would bypass the entire rigid symbolic network, is in fact, improbable.²¹ Body slashing, bleeding, and other painful interventions, therefore, are not actions celebrating liberation from authority, but quite the contrary, an anguished statement about the yearning to re-establish its attributes. Because what would happen if authority is usurped or if it is proven beyond doubt that such an external deterrent to absolute freedom never existed is still unknown and frightening. Therefore despite the alleged inherent adversity of masochist towards social order the exhibition of the extent to which body is penetrated, wounded, hurt, and flayed does not constitute an open confrontation with the law. The protest is not really *against* phallic power, or power as such, but is a warning that father’s law is in dire need of reinforcement. What masochist performances ultimately seek is the reaffirmation of the contract and the repositioning of the (male heterosexual) subject at the center of the production of meaning.²² The child masochist just wants its daddy’s full attention.

Performative body mutilation never invites a total divestment of power nor urges unlimited freedom, which Erich Fromm defined as negative freedom, or “freedom from.” Instead, it proposes what he calls “positive freedom,” freedom without which social contract would be unthinkable.²³ Fromm names it “freedom to” and it is essential for the subject’s productive participation in society, even if it necessarily ends with a new confrontation with power. Even when the subject wishes to remain part of a social contract (and thus essentially “ruled”) it must be free in order to be able to at all enter such a contract and then further interrogate or protest the authority behind it. In the opposite scenario, the subject finds itself dominated by power: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free,’” according to Foucault.²⁴ Social rela-

tions are always and necessarily relations of power that is constantly negotiated, interrogated, struggled over, and contested. Foucault sees it as a “game” that is accessible only to subjects who are free to challenge the structure of power:

[F]reedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to physical determination.) The power relationship and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated. [...] Rather than speak of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an “agonism” – of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.²⁵ (Foucault, 342)

Every social relation and contract finally resemble masochistic ones, in which one side (political masochist) perpetually negotiates the conditions of its contract with power. In her essay on the politics of power after the Enlightenment, Elizabeth Byers discusses “political masochism” in terms close to Foucault’s “subjectivity,” as the nature of social relations not informed by authoritarianism and in which subjects are free to enter into and define specific models of rule acceptable to the majority:

[a masochistic political contract entails] non-erotic rational submission [that] stems from a critique of political systems engaged in forced submission. If we maintain that individuals must rationally and actively consent for a system to be considered masochistic, then monarchies, dictatorships and other political systems with authoritarian structures cannot possibly meet our definition of the masochistic. [...] Political masochism functions [...] as a form of government based on a negotiation between the power of the individual and the power of the state rather than the absolute rule of the monarch, dictator or lord. (Byers, 103)

In the universe in which absolute freedom is still an unthinkable concept, political masochism means willing submission to power that nevertheless allows the individual to (relatively) freely associate with others and (ideally) modify the kind of power it is ruled by. Ultimately this is the most freedom a social body can exercise. Performative masochism, therefore, exposes not only the body brutalized by the social contract gone awry, but also signifies the body of the political masochist seeking its right not to eradicate authority altogether, but to reconstruct it.

Communal Body Spectacle

The ultimate image of suffering in the face of authority that arguably inspires masochistic exhibitionism is Christ's agony before the absolute, irrevocable and non-interfering power of his Father. However much this image insists on passivity of the tortured body, Silverman's argues that the Christian masochist can be viewed as a rebellious figure who goes into a head-on collision with the social order. Her Christian masochist even dares seek what I have argued throughout that performative masochism ultimately precludes – a radical remodeling of culture:

In this particular subspecies of moral masochism there would thus seem to be a strong heterocosmic impulse—the desire to remake the world in another image altogether, to forge a different cultural order. The exemplary Christian masochist also seeks to remake him or herself according to the model of the suffering Christ, the very picture of earthly divestiture and loss. (Silverman, 198)

Granted that such religious remodeling of cultural order in no way advocates change in the structure or nature of power—which is what has been a historical revolutionary practice and the most probable reason few revolutions have brought positive changes. Christ's problem, after all, is not weak or corrupt authority that needs to regain credence, but the wickedness of the human race itself. This bold new "different cultural order" that Silverman suggests can then only mean that the *subject* needs to transform or in other ways make itself more agreeable to the incorruptible and unquestionable divine authority. Yet Christ's coming unto Law is interesting also from the point of what I have, thus far, argued is the social imperative for the preservation of intact and unquestioned phallic order. Here again the Christian narrative emphasizes its priorities slightly differently, as Christ only accomplishes this by and after physical torment which, as Silverman argues, has "emasculating implications, and is in its purest forms intrinsically incompatible with the pretensions of masculinity." As a result, she insists, Christ assumes his position within the divine family "in a suffering and castrated position."²⁶ It is not his "body" that needs disciplining, but rather the sinful "flesh" of the multitudes that is vicariously punished.²⁷ Christ's sacrifice supposedly creates and redeems the community circumscribed by this event. This is a community whose origin and *telos* lie in (his) death, as it not only emerges out of death, but eases the burden of death on community members.²⁸

In one of the closing scenes of *The Interrogation* Kostis attends an Easter mass in church but ends up agitated at the sight of Christ's tortured body and disgusted by the civilization created and sustained on this morbid spectacle: "This is what they worship: torture, a death sentence, a nude, dirty, wounded, pierced, bloody, torn-apart, suffering body dying a slow death. A tortured body. That's what their worship and love are directed towards. That's what turns them on."²⁹ Kostis clearly voices the inability of viewers to ponder victim's anguish because they are fascinated by the spectacle of violence. Instead of becoming a symbol of community formed as a result of his sacrifice, Christ's mutilated body becomes the single focus of attention with people mesmerized by the obscenity of his tortured and expiring physicality. With this crumbles the very idea that his death can be experienced by others as their own and thus become a motive for their communion. It is for the same reason quite unrealistic to expect that any meaningful community can arise from observing a masochistic performance, or even less that the performance could have the capacity to incite action. On the other hand one may justifiably wonder whether Kostis' discomfiture at the sight of Christ's tortured body may have constituted a recognition with his own disempowerment – a misrecognition in fact that doubly underlines Kostis' exclusion, because Christ's symbolic castration in fact *empowered* and established him in the Law.

However, as much as Kostis' perception is critical of the falsity of church communion that lost its true meaning amidst the superficial manifestations of the institutional ceremony, it emphatically underlines his own failure to comprehend its meaning. Neither his apparent identification with Christ's agony nor his alleged leftist politics prevent him from displaying palpable intolerance and racist hatred towards immigrants, vendors and prostitutes he meets in the streets of Athens. Through his unwillingness to grant social pariahs the respect that as a survivor he demands of others, Kostis establishes his own fictional (national and masculine) superiority that lacks merit in the same way as does his social exclusion. Moreover, the humiliation he fantasizes of inflicting on the bodies of those excluded from the Greek society is identical to the aggression he, himself, underwent in jail.

The ending finds Kostis looking into his ruined body in the mirror in ironic reconciliation with himself, his father, and the legacy that he inher-

ited and further transmitted to his daughter: “the discolored bruises, faded scabs, the furrows in his forehead, the bulging veins on the thighs and calves, the tight bandages around his swollen feet. *Gloria Patri*.”³⁰ Tentative reconciliation is achieved between the father and daughter, when Kostis realizes his life is a masochistic reiteration of his father’s life, in a similar way in which Marina will be compelled to repeat his own:

My father was a nightmare, [Kostis] wants to say that, too, to spit it out from deep inside himself. [...] I listened to him tell me [...] about the battles and exile and the prisons, and it was as if I were translating a book written in a foreign language. And, afterwards, when I would go over what I had translated, I saw that it read: *You must suffer even more. You haven’t suffered enough, not as much as he did. It needs to be more. Even more.* And I joined the struggle. And I would again. I would do it all over again if I could.³¹

Marina apparently fails in her mock-analytical attempts at “healing” Kostis and making him socially functional by a verbal reiteration of trauma. In this respect, it may be tempting to read Kostis as a passive victim who repeats the events that hurt him and does not believe in the liberating potential of the universal talking cure. However, perhaps his deliberate silence about the past enables Kostis to emerge an even stronger character who accepts the consequences of his actions. His abused body “bearing the most livid marks of [history’s] brutality” may be the force that Marx hoped would eventually transform history (Eagleton, 230). This would, in turn, make Kostis a revolutionary in the “proper” sense, who is unafraid to confront power directly and demand its overthrow even if it cost him his life. And that is as much as one can expect of a human being.

Notes

- 1 Lip sewing has been used as a more obvious format of pointing to the problematic of silencing the truth about certain issues, or to the position of disempowerment. Ulay sewed his lips shut in 1976 while Marina Abramović answered questions on his behalf, reversing the process of silencing of women in patriarchal cultures. David Wojnarowicz did it in 1980 to protest the societal response to the AIDS epidemics. More recently groups of immigrants in Italy, as well as asylum seekers in Australia have resorted to lip sewing in attempts of drawing media attention to their detention and poor living conditions.
- 2 <http://www.vice.com/read/petr-pavlenky-testicles-red-square-police-day-russia-puttin>. Last accessed on June 15, 2014.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 148.

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- 5 The artist has spoken about her family life in her many interviews and authorized biographies. I reference James Westcott's *When Marina Abramović Dies*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010.
- 6 Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 16.
- 7 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 25-6.
- 8 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 55.
- 9 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 27-31.
- 10 Caroline Williams, "Ideology and Imaginary: Returning to Althusser," 37.
- 11 Claude Lanzmann, 200-220.
- 12 Cf. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex*, trans. Franklin S. Klaff (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011); Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud M. Kurth (Berlin: Klamper Press, 2013); Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- 13 Deleuze, *Masochism and Cruelty: Venus in Fur*, 103-10.
- 14 Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure*, 17.
- 15 Cf. O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*.
- 16 Abramović frequently utilizes photographs of her parents in the background and reveals their double roles as her parents and as WWII heroes invested in socialist power structures.
- 17 <http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?type=related&kv=8812&t=objects>, accessed August 2014.
- 18 Cf. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 196-232.
- 19 O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 13.
- 20 Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
- 21 Caroline Bynum discusses self-mutilation from a medievalist perspective as a means of *rapprochement* between the individual and the sanctity of Christ's body standing for the authority they try to reach. Medieval history records many instances of body manipulation and willing mutilation for religious goals, most of them performed by women, who are in patriarchal societies generally inclined to consider their bodies as "impure." The only way to elevate them to purity is through spilling their own blood. Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice," 175.
- 22 Cf. Smith, "Action Movie Hysteria," 100-103.
- 23 Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 31.
- 24 Foucault, "Subject and Power", 342.
- 25 Pavlensky likewise describes his actions as provocations: "My objective is to create a particular situation, using only minimal components... The government tries to make society and the individual into objects of their authority, to objectify them. My goal is to create situations which pull the governing bodies into it and objectifies them, when they intervene and develop the action, at the point when I am already not doing anything." <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22278/1/earlobe-slicing-artist-petr-pavlensky-i-feel-excellent>. Accessed October 2014.
- 26 Silverman, 198.
- 27 Silverman, 197.
- 28 Community that arises from death (of another) has been extensively discussed by Georges Bataille and subsequently by Jean-Luc Nancy.

- 29 *Interrogation*, 115.
 30 Maglinis, *Interrogation*, 120.
 31 Maglinis, *Interrogation*, 108.

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