

## SACRED CRUELTY IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND POPULAR CULTURE

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### Introduction

Contemporary art and religion seem to be for many art theorists contrasting cultural fields. Until recently, religious and/or spiritual pieces produced by artists, artisans or religious people were not taken seriously by the contemporary art world. Galleries and museums of contemporary art showed little interest (if any) in this type of art/craft production, grounding their dismissal on considerations about artists being trained in secularized academic environments. Thus, religious and/or spiritual art, regardless of its medium (from embroidery and wall hangings to videos and holograms), has been treated more like “Outsider Art” or “Art Brut”- a cultural production which exists alongside or in opposition to the official art of the conventional art world. It should therefore come as no surprise that religious and/or spiritual art has been displayed more in ethnography museums or religious community centers and not in contemporary art museums or galleries. Institutionally, it has received the same treatment like other “outsider” arts (such as “naïve art”, “visionary art”, “spiritual art”, “mediumistic art”, “psychotic art” or “art of the mentally challenged”), usually being labeled as belonging to popular culture and folk art.

Recently, both museums and art galleries have started to express some interest in religion and/or spirituality<sup>1</sup>. Harry Philbrick, the curator of one of the first contemporary exhibitions on religious issues at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, argues that this exhibition

is built firmly on two presumptions, as are the great religions: that we are, as flesh and blood mortals, transient beings; and that there is a higher order or plan towards which we aspire. For thousands of years art and religion have mutually claimed these truths as their own, often in service of each other (Philbrick 2000: 16).

<sup>1</sup> Just to mention one example, in 2000, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art displayed the exhibition *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium*.

Over the past two decades, the relationship between contemporary art and religion has manifested many times in the form of art exploring religion in a critical manner then dismissing it for obscurantism, censorship and oppression. Many works of contemporary art have been criticized for offending religious people and their feelings. Perhaps the most well-known example in this respect is Andres Serrano's controversial “Piss Christ”. Alfonso D'Amato claims that this “so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity. The art work in question is a photograph of the crucifix submerged in the artist's urine... This work is shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving of any recognition whatsoever” (D'Amato 1989) Yet, for several art theorists, Serrano's piece is not abhorrent or offensive but a contemporary instance of “sanctification of the profane” because the artist brings to the fore an idea from the Gospel traditions according to which Jesus Christ has effaced the social barriers between pure and impure (or clean and dirty)<sup>2</sup>. Whatever the right interpretation of Serrano's “Piss Christ” is, a certain degree of symbolic violence is at stake in this art piece. The aim of this paper is twofold: to show how cruelty and “ugliness” from traditional religious art have remained a silent partner in the “aesthetic education” of the contemporary profane, and to argue that contemporary artists use traditional religious themes dealing with cruelty and martyrdom in non-traditional ways (but this does not mean that the sacred is completely replaced by the secular). Art that parallels the religious ritual and practice uses pain as a vehicle for religious transport and this motif is quite ubiquitous regardless of religion.

Before detailing this argument, the concept of “cruelty” must be defined. It seems that there is no single understanding of this term. However, one of the most popular definitions of cruelty is close to that proposed by Victor Nell in his paper “Cruelty's Rewards: Gratification of Perpetrators and Spectators”. According to Nell and others “cruelty is the deliberate infliction of physical or psychological pain on other living creatures, sometimes indifferently but often with delight”. Then he adds that there is no psychological or neurobiological explanation for cruelty's reward value and ubiquity and that our animal nature explains human cruelty (Nell 2006: 211). In other words, Nell tries to argue that human cruelty has an evolutionary explanation. However, this definition of cruelty seems unsatisfactory because, as philosopher Nick Zangwill points out:

a doctor might inflict physical pain on a patient in the course of an operation, and a therapist might inflict psychological pain in the course of therapy that is intended to help a patient. Doctors and therapists might

<sup>2</sup> For more on Serrano's defense, see Steiner 1997: 59.

even take delight in causing pain if they think that it means that the cure is working. However, the doctor or the therapist does not pursue or take pleasure in pain for its own sake' (Zangwill 2006).

I would add to Zangwill's observation against Nell that cruelty is never "a pain inflicted indifferently". If we talk about human cruelty then we have to take into account the religious, moral, metaphysical or social significance of it. To this end, in what follows, I will discuss several instances of cruelty and pain in both popular culture and art.

In the first part of this paper, I discuss with the pre-modern "good" cruelty and pain. I aim to show how cruelty and pain have served the pre-modern man in a diversity of social and religious ways. The second part of this paper deals with what Ariel Glucklich calls "the collective cultural amnesia that we share in reference to religious pain". He claims that starting from the 19th century, "with the invention of anesthetics pain becomes strictly a medical problem" (Glucklich 2001: 179). Yet, my aim is a different one: I attempt to show that the so-called "collective cultural amnesia" is not always "collective". To this end, I will offer some contemporary examples of "good" cruelty and pain. The conclusion will be that even after the "medicalization of pain" (in the 19th century), the sacred pain and cruelty are still important loci in visual culture and art. In other words, as Mircea Eliade posits, the sacred is simultaneously revealed and camouflaged within the profane<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, I do not necessarily share the views of the "conventional wisdom myth"<sup>4</sup> according to which religion promotes violence and cruelty against human beings and animals. This kind of argument is customarily directed against religion in general, but, as William Cavanaugh rightly argued, this piece of conventional wisdom can be questioned on the grounds that institutions and ideologies labeled as 'secular' can be just as violent and 'cruel' as those labeled 'religious'. In other words, he rejects the idea that religion is a trans-cultural and trans-historical component of human life, essentially distinct from 'secular' components (e.g. economical and political components):

once we begin to ask what the religion-and -violent arguments mean be "religion", we find that their explanatory power is hobbled by a number of indefensible assumptions about what does and does not count

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade claims in his classical text "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion" that modern man and women who proclaim themselves as secular beings and residents of a profane world are still unconsciously motivated by the memory of the sacred (Eliade 1968).

<sup>4</sup> For more on challenging "the conventional wisdom", see Cavanaugh 2007.

as religion... The myth of religious violence also provides secular social order with a stock character, the religious fanatic to serve as enemy (Cavanaugh 2009: 4).

Therefore, what we call 'religion' has a history and what counts as 'religious' depends on various configuration of authority and power (exactly as in art's case).

### **Cruel Religious Imagery: Saint Erasmus's Recurrent Symbolic Evisceration and its Value in Popular Culture**

There is a longstanding tradition to produce artistic images (paintings, engravings, lithographs, sculptures, films) that epitomize the ordeals of martyrs. This predilection for extremely cruel imagery can be detected in many artistic representations both from "high art" and popular culture. A telling example is the recurrent representation of Saint Erasmus's evisceration. According to the *Hagiographies* (the "official" biography of saints or venerated persons), Saint Erasmus of Formia (an early Christian martyr who died c.303?) was venerated as the patron saint of Mediterranean sailors (similar to Saint Patrick of Ireland). In the majority of *Hagiographies*<sup>5</sup> he is described as suffering numerous ordeals: from teeth plucking and skin carding with iron to starvation and beatings with leaden mauls "until his veins broke and burst".

After the 14th century, numerous visual representations of Saint Erasmus's martyrdom focus on his evisceration in spite of fact that the majority of the official written histories about his life and death do not mention the evisceration as an experience the saint had to endure. There are at least six representations (engravings, paintings, miniatures) which depict this unusually cruel ordeal produced by famous artists (Jaques Callot, Nicolas Poussin, Carlo Saraceni, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Dirk Bouts, Oranzio Borgianni)<sup>6</sup> and many other representations whose creators remain unknown. All these representations envision Saint Erasmus naked with a hole cut in his belly and

<sup>5</sup> Hagiographies are books about the biography of saints or venerated persons. Saint Erasmus's martyrdom is presented for example in the hagiography book known as *Golden Legend* (compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa in 1275 First Edition Published 1470, translated into English by William Caxton). The martyrdom of Saint Erasmus is presented in Volume 7 (Life of Saint Erasmus, 128): available online at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume7.asp#Erasmus> but also in other legendary narratives, such as *Acta Santorum*.

<sup>6</sup> Jaques Callot's *Le Martyre de Saint Erasme* can be seen at the National Library Paris; Poussin's work is at Pinacotheca di Vatican; Saraceni's evisceration can be seen at Gaëte Cathedral; Bouts and Borgianni's eviscerations of St. Erasmus are hosted by St Peter's Church in Louvain.

one end of his intestines tied to a winch. This disemboweling scene is a horrifically violent depiction which attempts to dignify the martyr. There are other art pieces which illustrate Saint Erasmus's evisceration but the emphasis is not on the act of evisceration but on Saint Erasmus holding his intestines which have already been pulled out. For instance, Albrecht Dürer has a woodcut dated 1505 in the Serlachius Collection which represents *Saint Nicholas, Ulrich and Erasmus* holding his intestines.

Yet, curiously enough, rigorous historical investigation shows that before 1695 no hagiographic writing refers to Erasmus's evisceration. There are many other kinds of torture described in the writings on the saint's life and martyrdom but evisceration seems to be acknowledged only in 1695 (in the critical hagiography *Acta Sanctorum*)<sup>7</sup>. But, even if Erasmus's evisceration is not mentioned before *Acta Sanctorum* (in 1695), this cruel representation started to circulate from 1362 (beginning with Jaques Callot's miniature that preceded Nicolas Poussin's more famous painting on the same topic dated 1628). Some art historians argue that the writers of the 1695 *Acta Sanctorum* took their inspiration in describing Saint Erasmus's evisceration from the visual representations they have had in front of their eyes. For example, the French art historian Emile Mâle puts forward an argument according to which some authors of hagiographies used as primary sources the woodcuts, miniatures, lithographs, paintings, engravings and other visual representations from both popular culture and high art, to describe Saint Patrick's evisceration (Mâle 1968).

In other words, the hagiography followed the visual production of evisceration and not the other way around. The question is why this cruel representation of evisceration has become so popular after the 14th century even if this particular ordeal is not addressed in the most important legends about Erasmus's martyrdom (or, if it is sporadically addressed after 1695, is it just an ordeal among the others and not the ordeal *par excellence*)? It seems that this ordeal of evisceration that appears in so many visual representations was actually an invented (imaginary) one. But what was the impetus for this horrific imagery? Why did people start to represent this ordeal without taking into account the official hagiographies of the Church?

It seems that this imaginary evisceration has been occasioned by various quotidian facts and happenings (like fear, stomach ache, abdominal cramps, menstrual cramps and so on) that little by little produced a mutation at the collective mental level: people started to believe that they can get rid of

<sup>7</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* is a sixty eight folio volumes of documents that examine the life of the Christian saints.



Heller Hours, c. 15th century, BANCMSUCB 150, f. 249v, Berkeley, University of California, Bancroft Library. <http://ucblibrary4.berkeley.edu:8088/imgwindow/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fnma.berkeley.edu%2Fark%3A%2F28722%2Fbk000820j2n&caption&extent=f.+249v>

these quotidian evils by the gesture of symbolic violence. Some cultural historians (Giorgi 2003: 119) claim that the imaginary ordeal of evisceration has an oral and popular origin because there are no written sources to have inspired the visual representations of evisceration<sup>8</sup>. Actually, this story about evisceration started to circulate widely beginning with the 14th century, when Saint Erasmus started to become more and more popular among Mediterranean sailors.

Apparently, the impetus for this imagery of evisceration seems to be precisely the terrible fear the sailors felt during their wanderings on the sea (fear of plague, rats, storms or pirates). Fear is said to be visceral (it comes from *viscera*). The imaginary evisceration of Saint Erasmus epitomized the exemplary ordeal which was meant to overcome the fear of plague, rats, pain and so on. According to Gustave Cohen, the inhabitants of Metz were scared to death of plague. They decided to organize a mystery play in which Saint Erasmus's evisceration was symbolically performed for two days (Cohen 1906). This imagery has its inception in early visual popular culture. There was even a certain rumor among sailors according to which fear or stomach ache can be cured effectively if a small piece of fishing rope is swallowed (the piece of rope epitomizing Saint Erasmus' intestines).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the art historian Rosa Giorgi states that even if we don't have any written evidence that Saint Erasmus's intestines were "pulled from his body with a windlass", this is an example when imagery influenced in fact the hagiography (Giorgi 2003: 119).

## Sacred Cruelty and Pain in Contemporary Art and Popular Culture

Art (craft included) and religion have different ontologies but this does not mean that they cannot overlap for a certain period of time without becoming indistinguishable entities. What makes religion and art linked activities is exactly the imagination which is the chief organ for both of them. However, there is no definitive theoretical consideration of how contemporary art and religion can build up a genuine dialogue. As already mentioned, contemporary art's link to religion manifests many times in terms of art exploring religion in a critical manner and dismissing it on different grounds. But, as I will argue in what follows, this does not mean that contemporary art's exploration of religion is always or preponderantly critical. It is also well-known that contemporary art is usually politically concerned and involved and this focus on social and political issues distinguishes contemporary art from traditional art (which has to do more with a certain traditional sense of the aesthetic than to politics). Still, there are considerable instances of contemporary art where the artist deals with sacred cruelty and violence and with other religious *loci* without necessarily implying that cruelty should be criticized and abhorred as obscurantist and ideological. A telling example in this respect is Marina Abramovic's performance "Thomas Lips" (Belgrade, 1975). In this ascetic piece of art the artist uses her own body as the primary site of transcendence and transformation by self-inflicting pain:

Abramovic progresses in a ritual act that begins with her eating 1 kilo of honey and drinking one liter of red wine from a crystal goblet that is eventually broken by her hand. This is followed by the ritual cutting of a star on her stomach and self flagellation with a whip, ultimately laying on a cross made from ice blocks with a heater suspended directly over the cut on her torso. This ritual is witnessed by an audience. After approximately 30 minutes the audience becomes increasingly nervous about her situation. They halt the performance by removing the artist in order to prevent her body from freezing (Hecht & Ekstrom 2001).

A more recent example is Pussy Riot's punk prayer: "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away" (2012), performed into the Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The five young Russian activists combined the aggressive punk-rock riffs with traditional Orthodox hymns, and eventually all of them were captured by security forces before they could finish their performance and then imprisoned. The critical "punk prayer" was meant as a violent reaction against both President Putin's politics and his close relationship with the Russian

Patriarch (whose rhetoric was very conservative, anti-LGBT and patriarchal). Their performance has also been interpreted as a violent attempt to desecrate a sacred space and that was, in fact, the final charge at the end of their notorious trial: "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred". However, this charge is not accurate as Pussy Riot's piece was clearly political if we take into account both the lyrics of the punk-prayer and the band's previous anti-Putin performances. The prosecution has refused to acknowledge the political motif of the punk song as a prosecuting strategy because the intention was to redirect international attention from the politically critical dimension of the piece to its "offensiveness" and violence against the believers. Thus, three girls from Pussy Riot band have been exiled to remote labor colonies and the Russian and international press continues to report on their vulnerability, frailty and suffering within these labor camps. The TV reports on violence penetrating the three women's bodies increased. Many images appeared in the press in which Tolonnikova, Alekhina, and Samutsevich's bodies are inscribed by all kinds of traces of violence. As Anya Bernstein argues:

despite the calls of those who warned that the women should not be turned into martyrs, their punishment –although arguably following the letter of law-ended up acquiring a distinct sacrificial character. Some stressed ascetic denial and martyrdom, emphasizing Christ-like self-sacrifice, while others emphasized the ways in which Pussy Riot became an inadvertent medium for ritual action and communication between multiple actors. What these seem to share is a rather well worn theme throughout human history: the use of women's bodies as the means of communicative practices-sacrifice, hierarchical discipline and legal warnings (Bernstein 2013).

Another example of contemporary reenactment of martyrdom is Michael Landy's "Saints Alive" from London's National Gallery, an exhibition consisting of automatons impersonating the martyrs from the *Legenda Sanctorum* (exhibition opened in May 2013). With this exhibition, the contemporary artist Michael Landy (one of the Young British Artists founders) attempts to explore both the nature of art and sainthood. The artist claims that he took his inspiration for this exhibition from the martyrs' legends (as told in *Hagiographies*<sup>9</sup>) and from the famous Renaissance paintings of the saints from London National Gallery (e.g. Carlo Crivelli's "Saint Peter Martyr" from 1476 and Lucas Cranach the Elder's "Genevieve and Apollonia" from 1506).  
<sup>9</sup> It seems that Landy consulted various hagiographies such as *Acta Sanctorum* (encyclopedic volumes documenting Christian saints' life translated from Latin into English). The full text database of *Acta Sanctorum* can be consulted online at: <http://acta.chadwyck.co.uk/>.

Landy's artistic choice was to re-enact these saints' martyrdom through giant kinetic sculptures which can be moved at the touch of an iron pedal. He re-created them in fiberglass, plaster and paint "robotic saints that move around" (Wilkins 2013), focusing on their cruel ordeal: Saint Lucy having her teeth pulled out and eyes gauged out; Saint Sebastian shot to death by arrows; Saint Catherine broken on a toothed wheel; Saint Lawrence roasted and Saint Jerome beating his own chest with a stone. Saint Francis's cruel martyrdom is featured twice: once as a headless form trying to remove his intestines and once as a violent self-harmer beating himself in its chest with a crucifix when visitors put money in its collection tray. Given to this bloody carnage is a new dimension through the mechanized sculptures which transport the spectators in inter-subjective interactions with the exhibited statues. The paintings of the martyrs are brought to life without necessarily respecting the 'real' story of torture described in *Hagiographies*<sup>10</sup>. As Phillip Maugham reports for "The New Statesmen":

Manipulating the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction, the machines flagellate themselves *ad infinitum*. 'Doubting' Thomas's hand rams into Christ's side. A machete slices through the scalp of Peter Martyr. When I visited at the weekend, two of the saints had hammered themselves into submission, literally. Pieces of A4 paper had been sello-taped to Saint Thomas and Francis: Not currently operational. We apologize for any inconvenience caused (Maugham 2013).

Similar to the imaginary evisceration of Saint Erasmus, these contemporary kinetic art pieces deal with sacred cruelty and the result is "a tremendous event that sizes the viewer, involving us in a spectacle of passion, conviction, suffering and belief driven both literally and mechanically by violence" (Cumming 2013). Many of these animated sculptures are literally destroying themselves. Yet, this destruction does not take place until a visitor of the exhibition physically activates the statues into life with a foot pedal mechanism (or, as in Saint Catherine of Alexandria's case, the "pedal" is a huge torture wheel which can be turned by the visitors). This participatory involvement from the spectators' side can be regarded as a re-enactment of the cruel ordeal each saint martyr suffered. Some critics of this contemporary art exhibition might claim that Landy's "Saints Alive" is shocking and blasphemous

10 The important Christian saints' martyrdom and acts are presented in *Acta Sanctorum* (encyclopedia volumes documenting Christian saints' life: <http://acta.chadwyck.co.uk/>). However, Michael Landy does not necessarily respect the specificity of each saint's martyrdom as described in *Acta Sanctorum* but he adapts the martyrdom to contemporary questions about sainthood.

because it displays a less holy perspective on saints, a perspective that made some spectators exclaim that the exhibition is "cool and fun". However, if we leave aside these considerations, according to which the exhibition is primarily aimed at entertainment, the purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning and functions of this contemporary re-enactment of sacred cruelty through contemporary art.

The contemporary artistic re-enactment of sacred cruelty represented in two dimensional, traditional paintings and in *Legenda Sanctorum* invites the spectator to feel the idea of sacred cruelty rather than merely think about it. The cognitive value of this exhibition is *experiential* in the sense that it has imaginative and affective components attached to the cognitive one. It tells the viewer what it is like to endure a cruel ordeal as opposed to merely acknowledging the existence of such cruel histories of death. As philosopher of art David Carrier posits, Landy's kinetic sculptures: "effectively bring the suffering saints into our contemporary world... Too often we take an aesthetic distance from old masters paintings seeing beautiful scenes of martyrs without engaging our emotions" (Carrier 2013). As Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art suggests, art objects have to be treated and analyzed as living beings because they possess agency which can influence the viewer's reactions and make them react as if they are engaging not with "dead matter" but with living beings (Gell 1998).

A slightly different imaging of the suffering saints is envisaged in the extreme horror movie *Martyrs*, 2008 (directed and written by the French director Pascal Laugier). The director/writer tells the brutal story of a girl who suffered terrifying abuses and violence as a young child. Although nearly catatonic, Lucie manages to escape from the people who kidnapped and tormented her and then she finds a good friend (Anna) in the mental institution in which both are patients. Fifteen years after, Anna re-experiences what Lucie suffered when she was a child. The same obscure pseudo-religious cult abduct and torture her repeatedly motivating their cruelty by claiming that only this way they would find out what the afterlife is like. The cult attempts to turn Anna into a martyr because they assume that only a martyr (and not just a mere victim) is able to transcend him/herself and, as one of the leaders of this cult (the so-called "Mademoiselle") declaims in the movie: "martyrs are exceptional people. They survive pain, they survive total deprivation. They bear all the sins of the earth. They give themselves up. They transcend themselves". This 'transcendence' is understood in *Martyrs* as the exact moment when the body in extreme physical pain moves beyond the awareness of the physical to a certain state which transcends this world and makes the martyr able to

see what is in the other world (in the afterlife). This understanding of ‘transcendence’ and ‘transformation’ is also shared by Marina Abramovic in her early performances, where the artist subjects herself to extreme psychological suffering and physical pain (even to the point of losing consciousness) to achieve transcendence of the self and the state of ‘holiness’. Mademoiselle says in *Martyrs* that young women are biologically predisposed to achieve what she calls ‘transcendence’: “Lucie was only a victim. Like all the others. It’s so easy to create a victim, young lady, so easy. You lock someone in a dark room. They begin to suffer. You feed that suffering. Methodically, systematically and coldly. And make it last. Your subject goes through a number of states. After a while, their trauma, that small, easily opened crack, makes them see things that does not exist”. At first glance, we encounter a different understanding of young women victimhood, one that counterbalances the cultural and religious obsession with young women as conduits for evil or houses for furies and demons. Examples include *Mahabharata*, where women are “said to be the root of all evil...because they are all regarded as exceedingly frail”, Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*, the religious horror films since the 70s.

The second half of *Martyrs* focuses exclusively on Anna’s martyrdom. Every scene of torture is slow, extremely disturbing and detailed. The viewer’s ordeal culminates with a sequence in which a cult member (Michael) first shaves Anna’s hair and then removes every inch of her skin-except for her face. As film critic Donato Totaro argues, this gesture of removing the skin “symbolically reduces her to her ‘essence’: flesh and bone” (Totaro 2011).

Totaro insists that this skin removal sequence has to do with the idea of racial ‘purity’ or ‘essence’ because the main character Anna was obviously not Caucasian. Yet, unlike Totaro, I do not necessarily read “*Martyrs*” as a political reaction regarding France’s national guilt over the Vichy regime and France collaboration with Nazis. Nevertheless, the movie also has a political dimension alluding to questions of national “race” and purity but it also hints to different understandings of ‘purity’: not only in racial terms but also in terms of sacrifice’s purity. Anna’s sacrifice as a martyr is “pure” in the sense that she does not sacrifice herself for a cause or for something she cares about. Unlike the saints from *Legenda Sanctorum* or Marina Abramovic (who deliberately deconstructs what it is to be human through extreme pain and stress), Anna is a different kind of “martyr”: she is sacrificed in the name of a cause she does not embrace or endorse. Then, her sacrifice seems purposeless and aimless (and in this sense “pure”). She is not even aware of why she is tortured. Yet, this does not make the cinematic scene in which Anna appears completely skinless, in a Christ-like position, less dramatically beautiful. She

endures all that pain inflicted in her body in a *vacuum* and not in the name of Christ (following his model) or in the name of a primordial experience of encountering the sacred, and exactly this “purity” of her sacrifice functions as a catalyst for a sacred transport.

Even though many feminist critics<sup>11</sup> have argued that Laugier exploits the image of the young woman/victim because women are culturally expected to sacrifice themselves for the good of family or community, I believe that the movie actually talks about a peculiar dimension of human sacrifice. It does not necessarily refer to the sacrificial offering to a deity of young men or women (virgin women) as in Indian Kali cult or Aztecs’ rituals, but rather tackles the sacrifice in itself since Anna is left without anything to sacrifice herself for.



Print-screen from *Martyrs*, 2008

Still, this “extreme horror” movie brings sacred cruelty into the contemporary world without exploiting pointless violence. Violence and cruelty are purposeful and central to the plot. As Caroline Verner claims:

New French extremism lends itself to readings that trade on both the popular and counter-aesthetic theories of horror. In doing so, it correlates not only with our distinct experience of fear consistent with twenty first century themes (e.g. cultural fragmentation, alienation, the abject/religious/racial ‘Other’), but it also provides evidence for the increasing interchangeability of high and low culture codes (Verner 2010: 32).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Donato Totaro’s article “*Martyrs*: Evoking France’s Cinematic and Historical Past” from *Offscreen* ([http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/martyrs\\_historical/](http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/martyrs_historical/)) where he mentions Joan Hawkins, Claire Duchon and Irene Bandhauer - Schöffmann among other critics who interpret these cruel acts directed against women as a form of collective patriarchal scapegoat for male’s humiliation under German occupation during WWII (see also, for example, Hawkins 2000).

Yet, the fact that *Martyrs* and other “extreme horror” movies do not occasion in viewers the aesthetic feeling of immediate and disinterested pleasure does not mean that they have to be approached through a counter-aesthetic theory perspective for the reasons discussed in what follows.

### Aesthetics of Cruelty and “Ugliness” in Religious Visual Culture

Nevertheless, the imaginary cruelty displayed in visual representations is not limited to evisceration or skin removing. There are many other examples of visual representations inspired by religious topics which deal with cruel contents (both real and imaginary). Sometimes, cruelty and ugliness are regarded as beautiful (as works of beauty) if a religious or spiritual purpose is at stake (like in already well-known expressions from popular culture - such as “his/her sacrifice is beautiful” or “sufferance is beautiful when it sets you free”). Yet, beauty and ugliness should not be understood in this framework as aesthetic judgments which are supposed to be purely subjective (grounded on liking and disliking or on feelings of pleasure and displeasure) like in traditional aesthetics. A “common” (unspecialized) opinion is that “Christian art” expresses the ugly (because it deals more with the scene of Christ’s crucifixion) and “pagan art” is concerned more with beauty (especially the art of the Greeks where beauty is understood as a matter of proportion, harmony and so on). However “common”, this interpretation seems simplistic and inaccurate. In Christian art ugliness and cruelty are rendered beautiful or “difficult beauties” because sufferance is regarded as beautiful when the martyr endures all that pain inflicted in his/her body in the name of Christ, following his model.

What is the explanation according to which, in Christian theological aesthetics, the crucifixion of Christ can be seen as beautiful? Is the “ugliness” and cruelty somehow mysteriously compatible with the beautiful at this one peculiar locus of human and salvation history? All the representations of the crucifixion in Christian art focus on the sufferance of Jesus Christ and on his mutilated body. Some theorists<sup>12</sup> emphasize the problematic relationship between cruelty and ugliness of the crucifixion, on the one hand, and the mysterious, *transfigured* and controversial beauty of the same event on the other hand. In the faith’s light the passion and the death of Christ is beautiful (“a cruciform beauty”<sup>13</sup>). Ugliness and cruelty of this representation is trans-

12 For example, Mark Bosco posits that though the cross where Jesus Christ has been tortured has the “appearance of an unbearable form, Beauty embraces the most abysmal ugliness of sin and hell by virtue of the condescension of the divine love, which has brought even sin and hell into the divine art...” (Bosco 2001: 38).

13 This term is formulated by Hans Urs von Balthasar (von Balthasar 1986).

lated through a peculiar “Christian aesthetic education” into a beautiful scene because: “beautiful should ignore the ugly, just as Aristotle’s God ignores the imperfect world” (von Balthasar 1986: 438).

But the “beautification” of the mutilated body of Christ in “Christian aesthetics” does not manage to completely cleanse the ugliness and cruelty from the event of crucifixion. As this article attempts to suggest, cruelty and ugliness remain the silent partners of holiness and beautification in many religious representation. The disadvantage of ugliness in comparison with beauty lies in the difficulty to be loved:

What than is meant by the beautiful? The beautiful is the immediate and direct object of love, the choice of inclination and of passion. Surely there is no need to command that one shall love the beautiful. But the ugly! This is not anything to offer to inclination and passion, which turn away and say; is that anything to love? (Kirkegaard 1995: 375).

Because an ‘ugly’ or cruel image is difficult to be loved, in some cases it is not just ignored but humiliated (like in David Lynch’s film “The Elephant Man”) or publicly blamed (*Degenerate Art Exhibition*, organized by Hitler in Munch in July 1937 where many paintings have been destroyed and vandalized)<sup>14</sup>. If we follow Alfred Gell’s anthropological dismissal of the aesthetic, ugliness in these art pieces not only fails to please, but it also triggers other visceral reactions. This is not so surprising if we take into consideration the etymology of the term “ugly” which derives from the Old Norse “uggling” (which means causing fear or discomfort). In a Freudian reading, both the uncanny and the ugly fall under the label of the fearful<sup>15</sup>. But not every ugly or uncanny image is at the same time fearful. Thus, as the examples discussed above attempt to suggest, ugliness and cruelty mean different things in different contexts and for different viewers. One can argue that in Saint Erasmus’s imaginary evisceration representations there is both ugliness and cruelty. But those people who disseminated these visual representations would not say that the ugliness and cruelty of evisceration is unlovable precisely because they ‘invented’ this ugly, cruel story of evisceration to cure their fear and despair. Then, these visual representations have both a concrete meaning and a quasi-practical function and through these two frameworks it becomes easy to be loved and even beautiful for those who need it and imagine it this way. Cruelty and ugliness

14 Degeneracy implied weakness, ugliness and disorder, and it readily merged with political metaphors that used the language of sickness and infection to describe political and racial impurity.

15 Freud remarked the linkage Uncanny-Ugly in “The Uncanny” (Freud 1963).

remain the silent partners of holiness and beautification in contemporary art and popular culture as long as such visual representations retain a symbolic meaning.

### Concluding Remarks

As Mircea Eliade posits, the sacred is many times unrecognizable and difficult to pin down when camouflaged in the modern profane culture. Yet, as this paper attempts to show, even if the sacred is sometimes camouflaged in contemporary culture and art in the most unexpected places, and usually difficult to decipher, this does not mean that we should give up attempting to identify and interpret the significance of these hidden symbolic structures. The contemporary spectator of art is not usually looking for attaining religious or spiritual experiences. Moreover, even when a contemporary work of art has a mythic or religious aura, this spiritual dimension is typically deconstructed or “demystified” (procedure which is identical to a certain degree with ideological demystification). Still, in spite of this distancing, the sacred does not cease to be present on an unconscious level especially camouflaged in human pain and sufferance:

...manifested indirectly through dreams and fantasies, through “para-religious” and “pseudo-religious” creations, and through all sorts of imaginary phenomena camouflaged in the modern profane (Douglas 2002: 279).

This does not mean that we can identify traces of the sacred in all contemporary artistic and cultural production. Thus, it is still possible to draw a distinction between providing the criteria for delimitating sacred (spiritual) phenomena from non-spiritual ones. However, this paper has argued that the spiritual dimension of contemporary art and culture are more widespread than usually assumed and certain instances of sacred cruelty and pain are reinvested and re-enacted in contemporary visual culture, in spite of the common assumption that contemporary artists turned their backs on religious and/or spiritual topics because they had recently witnessed too much brutality attributed to religious intolerance.

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## **Maria-Alina Asavei Sacred Cruelty in Contemporary Art and Popular Culture**

### **Abstract**

Religious experiences are directed toward the sacred, although religion can be regarded as one of a number of possible sources of the sacred. This paper's main aim is to show that contemporary culture and religions (and/or spirituality) are not contrasting cultural fields as often assumed. To this end, it brings focus to instances of sacred cruelty from contemporary art and culture, applying the anthropological method of "art agency" proposed by Alfred Gell for the analyses of the objects of art (Gell 1998). The conclusion will be that sacred cruelty and pain are still present in contemporary art and visual culture even if, as Mircea Eliade posits, the sacred is simultaneously revealed and camouflaged within the profane. 'Cruelty' and 'ugliness' remain the silent associates of 'sacredness' and 'beautification' in contemporary art and popular culture as long as the cruel visual representations retain a symbolic meaning and a quasi-practical function.

**Keywords:** sacred cruelty, popular culture, contemporary art, religiosity, pain, symbolic violence.