

Dubious Matters

Stefan Hertmans

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The Paradox of the Obscene

Lust requires a reluctant public in order to benefit from the obscene.
Rüdiger Safranski

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Slavoj Žižek opens his book, ‘The plague of fantasies’ (1997) stating that he suspects that while we would like to tolerate our partner being unfaithful, our good intentions will be thwarted by the taunts of our imagination that conjures things up in the form of scenes: ‘Why does she have to lick him right *there*? Why did she have to spread her legs so *wide*?’ At that moment, he writes, ‘I am lost, sweating and quivering, my peace gone for ever. This *plague of fantasies* of which Petrarch speaks in *My Secret*, images which blur one’s clear reasoning, is brought to its extreme in today’s audiovisual media.’

Although the media often serve up these erotic images with the claim that they are ‘aesthetic’, this doesn’t spare us the fear that lies concealed in every form of obscene fantasy. The fact that we are determined to see the taboo as something aesthetic is precisely what bestows anxiety on our desires and makes them obscene. For many people this was first made startlingly clear in Pasolini’s *Salo*.

Is the contemporary art that focuses on this problem – plays for instance in which obscene transactions require a moral semblance of catharsis – concerned with deliberately reinforcing our desire for the obscene under the guise of aesthetic criticism? If that is the case, it would mean that we want to maintain something like a boundary between what we openly profess and that which we cherish or fear in secret. It is a mentality that transforms this intention out of fear into a ritual of gratification – fear of the possibility that the scenario of ‘adultery’, or the violence that we fantasize by way of these images, might genuinely impact on us. The actor, as was already the case in Aristotle’s theories of catharsis, enjoys and suffers in lieu of us. All we are is onlookers – in a sense our pleasure is metaphorical, if we use this word in its original sense, meaning ‘transferable’: it is a case of a ‘transfer’ of the medium to our own mode of experience. This mediation between fear and desire that is involved in viewing something, increasingly forms the core of the obscene pact with the viewer, a pact that dominates not just pornography as such, but also the entire phenomenon of

the 'candour' of the media. It is this claim to candour – that there nothing should be hidden from us, that we have the right to the 'entire' truth – which was once the fundamental slogan of the struggle for emancipation of the generation of May '68, that has degenerated into a pretext by which a smirking pleasure can enjoy itself, without the Kantian notion of wellbeing which requires the mind to observe itself critically. On the contrary, in the dialectics of the obscene the mind specifically does everything to avoid looking at itself in the mirror of self-awareness, on pain of losing its smirking pleasure. What was once intended to be emancipatory with the idea of enlightening the mind reveals now the obscure convolutions of an act of repression. Art, which has always been the theatre of paradigms that have to do with fear and pleasure (usually referred to in this combination as the 'sublime'), cannot be immune to these mechanisms.

Or does it have to do, as catharsis theory proposes, with an attempt by way of the artwork to banish the obscene by exorcizing it – something that would immediately transform the transaction into a sort of ancient rite, an expulsion of the devil by the very act of summoning up that which is 'evil'? Ritual or rite? Gratification or exorcism? Avoidance or preservation? What do I look at when I don't want to be looked at?

In Genesis in any case the biblical God was sufficiently aware of this theatre of guilt and knowledge that, in an unalloyed Blue Lagoon scene, he offered the protagonists Adam and Eve a Tree of Knowledge. It is not so much the fig leaf and serpent that are the prime symbols of sexual shame and theological betrayal, but the tree itself that became the symbol of every drama of seeing in combination with knowledge: one was only permitted to observe without insight; moreover, the consequence of this attempt to see in combination with acquiring knowledge of one's Creator was that original sin was inflicted on the whole human race. This then is the primal fundamentalist sentence passed on this act of knowing-through-seeing: in the cults of the divinities of the desert there is a taboo on enjoying the pleasures of the oasis and at the same time 'knowing' them, while at the same time one is exposed to their immediate and seductive presence. So cunning was the Old Testament primal ruler that this mischievous piece of theatre has governed every form of contemplation granted to humanity ever since. Every time we look at the tree of knowledge that art and life have offered us in every form and in all colours, the taboo on understanding crops up as an atavistic reminder: You shall not understand what you see, on pain of losing paradise. If you want to be happy, don't use your brains. This then is the ancient battle between knowledge and faith, in the service of the costly and dubious happiness involved in innocence. Since Kant, we know that humanity stands in any case outside its own knowledge. Kant's conclusion was that the 'Thing' that is the world remains a fatal Unknown for the thinking person. Its existence, Martin Heidegger added, is therefore an 'ex-existence', a 'standing outside'.

This perverse scenario of forbidden knowledge culminates in the marvellous paragraph about love in Plato's Symposium, in which the aged Diotima, who wishes to teach Socrates about love, tells him that they have spoken about the loveliness of the loved one, but that when one looks at Eros, at desire itself, at the lover thus, one sees someone much less loveable than when one looks at the loved one, at the object of love. She goes on to tell Socrates that Eros is poor and homeless and that, for all his persistence, he remains needy. He is in pursuit of everything and is endlessly inquisitive, but whenever he lays his hands on something, it slips through his fingers. In this way he never experiences lack, but he is also never satisfied. He is the son of Wealth and Poverty (*Poros* and *Penia*). Diotima speaks of him as literally 'a great daemon', or spirit. And she goes on to add that everything that is daemonic is situated between the god and mortals.¹ Eros moreover is also to be found between wisdom and ignorance. Diotima states that the lover, due to his nature as a sophist, will never really be able to engage in philosophy. But we should comfort ourselves with the thought that philosophers don't do so either, she says, because they have no need for it, because they lack

nothing (Stoic asceticism). Only he who oscillates between these two extremes of knowledge and ignorance is able to philosophize. And that is precisely the position of he who longs for wisdom (like Socrates, for instance, who lusts after Alcibiades): he is caught between knowledge and ignorance. Of necessity he will then have to learn to think against himself. You imagined love from the point of view of the loved one, Diotima says, and not from that of the lover. For this reason you saw love as something exalted and beautiful. But the perspective of 'the loving one' is quite a different one. What this hundred and eighty-degrees turn presents us with is not love, but the appetite of the insatiable, needy gaze that wishes to know and penetrate that which it desires, and this leering gaze is obviously anything but charming. An obsession prevails here that will have to learn to confront its own neediness and ignorance. And this gaze has unmistakably something about it of sophistry and is therefore obscene.

It appears that the obscene contains something that is always located outside the orbit of the longed-for self-knowledge, so that the individual is forced to fall back on the dubious status of his own subject structure. In doing so it also banishes contemplative human beings from the carefree aesthetic pleasure of art, although this voyeuristic effect at the same time is what forms the hidden core of every act of watching. This is certainly the case when we consider those endless scenes of rape and seduction, lusty fauns and helplessly sleeping nymphs that have shamelessly haunted western painting down the ages. Anyone who gives the various depictions of fauns and nymphs in the work of artists such as Rubens and Titian as much as a fleeting glance, or the seductive virginal figures in Cranach, the complicity between elderly satyrs and gratified nymphs in Tiepolo's work or the idle, provocative self-pleasuring pose of the Venus of Urbino, sees a theatre that is full of dark emotions, delight in conquest, a dramatics of a dubious kind that is only sublimated by the virtuosity of the displayed – a virtuosity that has entirely taken over the place of the libido. What is above all remarkable is that this obscene pleasure, at the risk of becoming banal, retreats no sooner do we speak of it. What is more, this suspect quality is found not where we would imagine, in the seemingly obscene scene itself. It is located in the way that the scene is sublimated and thus it eludes our analytical faculties. All that violence, all that sexual lust – it seems to be absorbed in our aesthetic enjoyment. It is precisely here that we take on the somewhat bewildered gaze of a rabbit staring in the headlights of a car. What the individual experiences as abject, as repugnant and also as alluring, becomes obscene because he wants to grant it a place in his aesthetic, and thus morally responsible capacity for judgement. As Julia Kristeva correctly remarked, the obscene is always that which is located beyond all possibility of appropriation. It is something as invisible as God.ⁱⁱ Due to this absence of appropriation, the observing individual experiences himself as strange; he loses the stable place from which he can make sovereign judgments. In this sense the dubious is always subordinate to the familiar theories concerning Brechtian alienation; only it radicalizes it, hurls it into an abyss of disrupted self-reflection, because it is impossible to discern any positive didactics in the obscene spectacle by which one can 'safely' get pleasure out of transgression. The person who philosophizes about his suspect nature, deconstructs himself as 'un-suspect' subject and thus becomes suspect to himself. Does anything Kantian remain to enjoy from one's observation of oneself? Without the possibility of self-appropriation we are faced with our own philosophical death. Kristeva also states that the obscene is always linked to Freud's concept of the death wish.ⁱⁱⁱ

****Take for example the now unfashionable live peepshows that have become a virtually archaic, inglorious branch associated with people-traffic, a temple of the lonesome, furtive gaze. It is a branch of the industry moreover in which employment has suffered exceptionally severely from internet porn which is far more ignominious. For the proletarian voyeur who has to pay to enter a space in order to enjoy this spectacle and who has to reveal himself at least with his gaze via a hatch – for this old-fashioned shifty sensualist – the woman who reveals her sex to him has shown**

him 'everything'. Therewith he submits to the scenario of conquest according to the naïve Don Juan: he believes that a conquest, even in the form of the detached and sovereign domination in and through his gaze, has really taken place. But precisely through this all-revealing pose, the woman has deprived him of the sight of herself as a 'whole person'; under his constricted gaze her genitalia become the icon of a symbolic conquest, nameless and ideal, instead of representing the most intimate part of an individual. That which the voyeur was so eager to see, the intimacy of the Other, deprives him of the sight of the person who displays it to him. The woman therefore appears to him as a *pars pro toto* and not as an individual; he even needs this 'disowning' in order as viewer to get some anonymous pleasure from his own 'little death'. The *pars pro toto* kills off every possibility of a genuine committal of oneself. Consequently he does not see any fellow human at all, precisely because he is unable to see anything 'at all'. The woman doing the striptease knows that: her identity vanishes behind what she shows and so she is able, completely free, to be her own truth – untouchable. Her gaze is completely open and indifferent. With open eyes, she has closed her gaze. For his part, the man who views her is alone with his image of her most 'intimate' part and prefers not to look her in the eyes. While he sees everything, no form of relationship is possible whatsoever. He thus sees the 'whole' person naked, and thus no longer sees any actual 'person'. This is why the woman remains invisible, while she is naked and can look him straight in the face if need be. For this reason also the scene is obscene: she can't make possible what it is about, but can only exist by way of a diminished reflex. The transparency is only a semblance, and this pretence of transparency, this invisible veil between viewer and viewed – this is what is at the heart of the obscene.

The obscene therefore requires a relationship where everything can be shown, not only without there being anything to see, but *in order that* there is nothing left to see of what it was really about (because what it was about or ought to have been about was a mode of relating to the other).

This is also how the game of power and politics works in our so-called democratic media – the aim is to obfuscate everything in all openness, because 'it' is there precisely where you are looking. But in terms of content there is actually nothing to see, because everything is shown shamelessly – so that it loses its specific value. The same thing occurs with truth in the public arena as happens with women in peepshows: everything is revealed, but we feel that we have missed the crux of the matter. In recent years successive scandals around so many different political and public figures have demonstrated *ad nauseam* that the game of 'total honesty' leads to a sense of an implausible absence of transparency with regard to the real intentions. The more the media scream that they are divulging something, the more we get the feeling that the essence is being withheld. After each sensational revelation a void yawns that makes us long for a vague disclosure, one that yet again eludes us. It is as if in the feigned openness of the mediatized society an impulse is at work the only aim of which is to retreat under the watchful eyes of everyone – a vanishing act on stage. The 'openness', the 'leaks' in public issues that always suggest that we are really about to get to the heart of the matter play the same game – the profession of 'candour' in the various talk shows are similar. The image of honesty in the public arena therefore is also always obscene: because the desires and the relationships do not admit to showing what it is really about, while at the same time appearing to suggest total openness.

'I show you everything you are looking for, but for just that reason you lose what you sought' – Slavoj Žižek calls this an 'inverted cynicism'. By way of an analysis of *Forrest Gump* (a film of 1994, with Tom Hanks unforgettable as the protagonist) he shows how this works. The entire United States can be seen in the tale of this accidentally successful sympathetic idiot, the painful truth of the country and its Hollywood-based ideology: anyone who ignores politics and ideology, who is genuinely unburdened and who submits to the winds of chance like a robot, who in fact plays the

role of the 'semantically empty' citizen, is ripe for a success story that serves as proof of the negation of the whole system (while Gump's girlfriend, who makes every effort to understand what is going on and who is politically active, is symbolically punished – at the end of the film she dies of AIDS). The obscenity of the truth shown here, Žižek says, is so great and is so shamelessly open, cynical and free of complexity, that there is no risk whatsoever of seeing it – most people thought it an amusing and poignant film. While in fact it exposes a scandal of the prevailing ideology, with legs spread wide as it were. Because the scandal of the 'société du spectacle' spreads its legs so wide, we don't really see what it is about. It is absolutely not about a sympathetic individual, but about a society that feeds on the denial of its own perverse dynamics.

It is therefore not telling any kind of success story; rather it is about the blind spot in the system of the media. As Gilles Deleuze so aptly puts it, "The unconscious is no theatre but a factory, a machine for production; the unconscious does not rave about mummy and daddy, it raves about races, tribes, continents, history and geography, always about a social field."^{iv} But this raving eludes its own critical awareness creating the supposition that the images are informal – this is exactly why they produce unseen truths of and for the unconscious.

ⁱ Plato, *Symposium*.

ⁱⁱ Julia Kristeva, 'Bataille solaire, ou le texte coupable', in: *Histoires d'amour*, 1983, p. 344: 'Or l'invisible que fut Dieu, c'est, précisément, dans l'expérience dramatique de l'animal pensant, *l'obscène*: le hors-scène.'

ⁱⁱⁱ Idem, p. 346.

^{iv} Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers*. Paris 1990, p. 197