

Bisogna esporsi (questo insegna il povero Cristo inchiodato?), la chiarezza del cuore è degna di ogni schermo, di ogni peccato di ogni più nuda passione... (questo vuol dire il Crocifisso? sacrificare ogni giorno il dono rinunciare ogni giorno al perdono sporgersi ingenui sull'abisso).

Noi staremo offerti sulla croce, alla gogna, tra le pupille limpide di gioia feroce, scoprendo all'ironia le stille del sangue dal petto ai ginocchi, miti, ridicoli, tremando d'intelletto e passione nel gioco del cuore arso dal suo fuoco, per testimoniare lo scandolo.

You must expose yourself (is this what the poor nailed-up Christ teaches?), the clarity of the heart is worthy of every sneer, every sin, every more naked passion... (is this what the Crucifix means? sacrifice every day the gift renounce every day forgiveness cast yourself ingenuous over the abyss).

We will be offered on the cross, on the pillory, between the pupils limpid with ferocious joy, leaving open to irony the drops of blood from the breast to the knees, gentle and ridiculous, trembling with intellect and passion in the play of the heart burning from its fire, testifying to the scandal.

Pier Paolo Pasolini 376-77*

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Exposure: Pasolini in the Flesh

For Giorgio Agamben

I. INCARNATION

Paul wrote from his prison cell to the Philippians:

Adopt towards one another, in your mutual relations, the same attitude that was found in Christ. Although he was in the form of God, he did not regard this divine equality as a precious thing to be exploited. Instead, he *emptied himself* by taking the form of a slave and being born like other human beings. And being in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

Abandon me! Incarnation is all about abandonment — abandonment to the flesh. Paul writes that in becoming flesh Christ abandoned the form of God; he emptied himself by taking on a limited materiality. This self-emptying is the exposure of the flesh. It is a kind of slavery that appeared to Paul in prison as liberation. What exactly did Christ abandon when he emptied himself? Certainly he did not abandon divinity as such; rather, he emptied the transcendental *form* and carried divinity into the material. From one perspective this abandoned being might seem precarious, foundationless, cast over the abyss, but really this abandonment testifies instead to the fullness of the surfaces of being. The self-emptying or *kenosis* of Christ, the evacuation of the transcendental, is the affirmation of the plenitude of the material, the fullness of the flesh.

Incarnation is first of all a metaphysical thesis that the essence and existence of being are one and the same. There is no ontological essence that resides beyond the world. None of being or God or nature remains outside of existence, but rather all is fully realized, fully expressed, without remainder, in the flesh. Incarnation means that the absolute oneness of all being, infinite and eternal, coincides completely with the constant becoming-different of the modalities of existence. The figure of Christ has often been understood as a point of mediation of the external relationship between divine essence and worldly existence. But the incarnation, the self-emptying of Christ, denies any possible exteriority and hence any need for mediation. Any imagined transcendent substance, separated from the world, is merely a hollow husk, a form emptied of all being. Or better, the transcendent is more properly understood as residing within the material,

immanent, as its in-dwelling potentiality.¹ Transcendence, the condition of possibility of being, should not be imagined as above or below the material — it dwells, rather, precisely at its very surface. Incarnation is the claim that there is no opposition and no mediation necessary between the transcendent and the immanent, but an intimate complementarity. This immanent transcendence is the innermost exteriority of being, the potentiality of the flesh.

Incarnation is also a theological proposition: The plenitude of materiality, the fullness of existence is divine. But why should we even speak about divinity here, when the form of God has been completely emptied out, abandoned? Because divinity marks the essential vitality of existence. The surfaces of the world are charged with a powerful intensity. Divinity resides precisely in the boundaries or thresholds of things, at their limits, passionate and exposed, as if surrounding them with a halo. Incarnation abandons any notion of a hidden God, any transcendental notion of a divinity that remains "pure" outside the exposure of materiality. This is the good news whispered to us by the "impure angel" that Pasolini loves. In the incarnation the divine becomes flesh with an electric vitality; and in turn our innocent limbs become divine, "con le carni brucianti / di splendidi sorrisi" [with the burning flesh of splendid smiles] (Pasolini, "Carne e cielo" 341).

Finally, incarnation is an ethical injunction: empty yourself, become flesh! This is the lesson the poor nailed-up Christ teaches us. (How little we have realized our flesh! We don't even know what flesh can do!) Incarnation is an option of joy and love. And the ultimate form of love is precisely the belief in *this* world, as it is.² So be it. (What else could Spinoza have meant by the love of God?) Our belief can finally have no object other than the flesh. Becoming flesh will be our joy.

Christ's life in the flesh plays out this drama. The metaphysical emptying-out which takes place in the incarnation at the beginning of Christ's life is perfectly balanced by the recognition at the end of his life of abandonment on the cross. Or rather, the birth of Christ is merely a formal incarnation, a nominal abandonment to this world. The real incarnation takes place on Calvary. Only hanging on the cross does Christ realize the flesh. When the naked body exposed on the cross cries with its ultimate voice, "Why have you forsaken me?" the

1 "The transcendent is not a supreme entity above all things; rather, the pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing" (Agamben 14-15).

2 "Seule la croyance au monde peut relier l'homme à ce qu'il voit et entend. Il faut que le cinéma filme, non pas le monde, mais la croyance à ce monde, notre seul lien.... Chrétiens ou athées, dans notre universelle schizophrénie nous avons besoin de raisons de croire en ce monde" ("Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.... Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrénia, we need reasons to believe in this world") (Deleuze 1985, 223/1989, 172).

question can only be rhetorical. The abandonment took place long before; the incarnation at birth was symbol of the emptying out of any possible addressee. What happens on the cross is that Christ fully fulfills that abandonment in the flesh. Christ was abandoned to the divinity of the flesh, in love and joy.

II. EXPOSURE

Take me now! Pasolini is fascinated with the immodest offering of Christ's body on the cross. His wounds are open. His entire body — breast, belly, sex, and knees — is burning under the gazes of the crowd and the elements. At the point of death, Christ is all body, an open piece of flesh, abandoned, exposed. This is when Christ's emptied divinity, its radiant surfaces shine forth most brightly.

The exposure of flesh is erotic. The divine charge that courses through the surfaces of being creates this intensity, this excitement. Eroticism, as Georges Bataille tells us, is assenting to life up to the point of death. Christ's incarnation is this pure affirmation of life, even to the point of death on the cross. Death functions here, however, not as the point of fascination nor as an instinct or drive of life, but merely as a negative limit that highlights in contrast life's affirmation. The erotic points us toward the vital continuity extending across the surfaces of being. It breaks down or dissolves the separateness, the self-possession, the discontinuity that exists among individual entities and things. It strips them naked, empties them, and puts them in common. Eroticism is thus a state of communication that testifies to our striving toward a possible continuity of being, beyond the prison of the self.³ The limits or boundaries of individual entities become open thresholds that feel the pleasures — the rise and the recess — of flows and intensities.

Erotic exposure, paradoxically, does not really involve seeing and being seen. In fact, exposure subverts a certain regime of vision. The exposed flesh does not reveal a secret self that had been hidden, but rather dissolves any self that could be apprehended. We not only have nothing left to hide, we no longer present any separate thing for the eyes to grasp. We become imperceptible. In the erotic we lose ourselves, or rather we abandon our discontinuity in a naked and divine communion.

Christ's crucified body is exemplary of this eroticism. For Pasolini, however, in contrast to Bataille, the erotic is not predicated on any kind of transgression. Transgression always functions in relation to (or in complicity with) a norm or

3 "Le passage de l'état normal à celui du désir érotique suppose en nous la dissolution relative de l'être constitué dans l'ordre discontinu.... C'est un état de communication, qui révèle la quête d'une continuité possible de l'être au-delà du repli sur soi" ("The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity.... It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self") (Bataille 1987, 23/1986, 17).

taboo, negating the dictates of the norm and yet paradoxically reinforcing the norm's effects. The transgressive act does not simply refuse the norm, but rather negates it, transcends it, and completes it. It exceeds a limit, but in its excess verifies the limit itself. Transgression always operates through a dialectic of negations. If the norm were destroyed, the transgression itself would lose all value. Pasolini's erotics depend not on transgression but exposure. No norm or taboo forms a negative foundation and no synthesis transcends the opposition. Exposure operates rather on a purely positive logic of emanation. It involves casting off, or really, emptying out all that is external to its material existence and then intensifying that materiality. What is exposed is naked flesh, absolute immanence, a pure affirmation.

Exposed flesh is not transgression but scandal. In other words, exposure does indeed oppose and negate the norms of propriety, but its effect does not depend on that opposition as a support. Violation of the norm is not primary to exposure; the negation is secondary, an afterthought, an accident. It turns its back on the norm — that is its great offense. Exposure operates in ignorance of the norm, and thus conducts, in the only way possible, its real destruction. Christ's body testifies to the scandal, the scandal of the cross.

III. CRUCIFIXION

In the act of incarnation Christ takes the form of a slave and renounces any divine separation not as a demonstration of ascetic denial but rather in search for the continuity of life and community. This being in common is an escape from prison. Sacrificing the gift is an option of joy. The exposure in the form of a slave that we all share, however, carries with it always and necessarily the potential of the most horrible torments, to the point of torture on the cross.

The effect of torture is always separation and discontinuity even in situations of extreme proximity and intimacy. Often we cannot even recognize our torturers as human; they are irremediably other to us. (We tend to think of them as dogs or beasts, when really those animals never separate themselves in such a way.) And at the same time the torture makes it impossible to recognize the continuity of our own lives. It's not me he's fucking, it isn't me they're burning with that iron prod — they can only touch my body. Torture forces us out of the flesh, it forces us to separate from our bodies, to make ourselves other. The experience of torture is a form of exile, at the most intimate levels of being — an exile from living. Torture makes impossible the exposure of the flesh, even when paradoxically our torturers try to strip us naked.

The miracle of Christ is to take the flesh back from the soldiers of empire who nailed him to the cross. Even in his torment Christ lived the flesh in all its intensity. The critique of torture does not require that we should live in such a way as to avoid all violence and all pain — that would be a life without intensity, always already separated from the violence of experience. Rather, we

should refuse the separation from the flesh that torture entails: live the violence of experience in the flesh, make our pain a mode of intensity and joy. This is the miracle that Pasolini sees in the crucifixion. The pain of the crucifixion does not fall back into a private language of isolated individuality, but rather opens up to a common language. Precisely to the extent that they create such a common language and a shared experience of the flesh, pain and violence can be erotic, because the erotic is nothing other than that shared intensity of our experience, that common electric charge coursing through our flesh.

Consider, for example, how authors such as the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch construct a kind of ritual violence through various institutions and contracts in an effort to invent common languages of the flesh. Their ritual and imaginary dramas of victimizer and victim seek to overcome or vanquish the separation that characterizes our daily torture. This violence thus points toward an erotic continuity, an affirmation of life. Pasolini's notion of exposure shares this project to discover an antidote to torture and separation, but it does not create an imaginary plane or a theater of representation. Representation still implies too much separation. Exposure, then, does not recreate the scene of torture but rather seeks to dissolve its boundaries and its effects of discontinuity. The violence of the exposed flesh does not separate into passive and active roles, but moves united in an erotic affirmation. Through exposure violence becomes again our own as a common language, a vital power of creation, a life force.

IV. FLESH

Abandonment to the flesh is a form of freedom. Exposed, the passions of the flesh are released from any normative structures or organic functions. This is Pasolini's continual call to the utopia of youth: "Allora la carne era senza freni" [Back then flesh had no brakes] ("La religione del mio tempo" 492). Becoming-flesh is a form of forgetting — a forgetting of self, propriety, discontinuity. Impure carnality, or rather the divine exposure of the flesh enacts its own logic of passions. This abandonment is the joy that Pasolini sees in Christ's example.

In un debole lezzo di macello
vedo l'immagine del mio corpo:
seminudo, ignorato, quasi morto.
E' così che mi volevo crocifisso,
con una vampa di tenero orrore,
da bambino, già automa
del mio amore.

In the faint stench of a slaughterhouse.
I see the image of my body:
half-naked, forgotten, almost dead.
This is how I wanted to be crucified,
with a flash of tender horror,
since childhood, already an automaton
of my love.

("L'ex vita" 400)

The abandoned body is set free — released from the prisons of separation, immersed in the impurity of this world, or rather in the maniacal love of this world, in the form of a slave, a love automaton.

Even the term "body" often seems insufficient for Pasolini. It is too caught up in the discontinuous and hierarchical functionings of various organs, too detached from other bodies and things, too implicated in that dialectical coupling with consciousness. Any residues of mind/body dualisms are completely out of place here. Even referring to ourselves as embodied seems too tied to those paradigms, as if we could imagine some spirit or mind potentially separate from corporeality so that we now had to insist on its unity with matter.

Pasolini prefers to think of "members" and "limbs" [membra] or simply "flesh" [carne]. Flesh is the vital materiality of existence. Flesh certainly refers to matter, a passionately charged, intense matter, but it is always equally intellectual. It is not opposed to or excluded from thought or consciousness. Rather, the paths of thought and existence are all traced on the flesh.⁴ Flesh subtends existence; it is its very potentiality.

Flesh is the condition of possibility of the qualities of the world, but it is never contained within or defined by those qualities. In this sense it is both a superficial foundation and an immanent transcendence — alien to any dialectic of reality and appearance, or depth and surface. It confounds all of these antinomies. Flesh is the superficial depth, the real appearance of existence. That the world is, how the world is, precisely such as it is, is exposed perfectly and irremediably in the flesh. (Is this what Spinoza meant when he said that reality and perfection are the same thing?) The exposure of the flesh is indeed the mystery of life, or rather the miracle of the world.

How do we love in the flesh? What is the flesh's desire? In erotic exposure the boundaries or discontinuities between self and other are broken down and dissolved to open a kind of communication or communion. This love cannot really be conceived as an encounter with the other because the self has already been completely emptied out, abandoned. Similarly, the desire cannot really be conceived as a becoming-other of the self because that too depends on fundamentally stable discontinuities, and implies in the end a return to self. We are only able to love in abandoning ourselves to the flesh.⁵ In the flesh I lose

4 "Il y a des cris intellectuels, des cris qui proviennent de la *finesse* des moelles. C'est cela, moi, que j'appelle la Chair. Je ne sépare pas ma pensée de ma vie. Je refais à chacune des vibrations de ma langue tous les chemins de ma pensée dans ma chair" ("There are intellectual cries, cries born of the *subtlety* of the marrow. That is what I mean by Flesh. I do not separate my thought from my life. With each vibration of my tongue I retrace all the pathways of my thought in my flesh") (Araud, "Positions de la chair" 1970, 351/"Situation of the Flesh" 1988, 110).

5 "Je suis devenu capable d'aimer ... en abandonnant l'amour et le moi" ("I have become capable of loving ... by abandoning love and self") (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 244/1987, 199).

track of which is your arm and my arm, your leg and mine, a tangle of limbs and members. Take me! Exposure is anonymous. It brings both an intensification of experience and an undifferentiation of matter. It sets in motion a wild proliferation of erotic zones and modes of intensity across the surfaces of the flesh (the warmth of your lips, the subtle vibration of my tongue), and at the same time brings about a tendential unification or communion. Hence the ecstasy of exposure.

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