

The Spectacles of Pain and Their Contemporary Forms of Representation¹

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Abstract

This essay offers a phenomenological interpretation of symbolic violence. According to my thesis, the craving for violent imagery derives from the audience's unconscious desire to liberate itself from pain's destructive effects. I argue that this unrealizable project of liberation can take three forms: it can aim to *express the inexpressible*, *escape the inescapable*, or *transfer the non-transferrable*. I further contend that the audience's approach to contemporary representations of violence is paradoxical: its irresistible craving for pain's *virtual* manifestations is no greater than its incapacity to tolerate pain's *actual* manifestations. After addressing some objections that my interpretation is bound to provoke, I conclude with some reflections regarding the possibility of an ethical engagement in symbolic violence.

The spectacles of pain of which I will speak in the following investigation concern the symbolic representations of violence in visual culture. We come across such spectacles in news reports, documentaries and fictional movies, in cartoons, computer games and comic books, in magazines and newspapers, as well as in galleries and museums. Although it is undeniable that violent imagery in significant ways shapes the personal, cultural, historical and political spaces of contemporary existence, critical investigations of this ubiquitous phenomenon still remain in their embryonic form.

My central goal is to counteract this deficiency by offering a phenomenological interpretation of the appeal of symbolic violence, which will rely upon the principles of genetic phenomenology. I will focus on the representations of symbolic violence and subject these representations to the phenomenological reduction. Once reduced, the representations of symbolic violence appear as peculiar unities of sense, which are constituted

through specific intentional accomplishments. The new task that emerges within such a methodological framework is that of interpreting these accomplishments and establishing a correlation between the appeal of symbolic violence and specific conscious as well as unconscious dispositions, that underlie the craving for violent imagery. According to my thesis, the appeal of violent imagery feeds on the desire to liberate oneself from the effect of actual pain experience. This project of liberation is essentially unrealizable, and it can take three forms: it can manifest itself as the desire to *express the inexpressible*, *escape the inescapable*, and *transfer the non-transferable*.

Before providing this thesis with phenomenological support, I will first offer a survey of the dominant approaches to symbolic violence in philosophy and psychology. This critical review will make clear that the available accounts leave the phenomenon in question largely undetermined. Having reached this realization, I will spell out my methodological approach in greater detail and then turn to the phenomenology of symbolic violence. Afterwards, I will address the unique characteristics of contemporary forms of symbolic violence and I will conclude by addressing some objections one could raise against this investigation.

Philosophical Explanations

The question concerning the origins, function, and significance of symbolic violence plays an important role in Plato's and Aristotle's reflections. In subsequent philosophical discussions, this question withdraws from the field of philosophical concerns. To the best of my knowledge, Plato's story of Leontius, which we come across in Book IV of the *Republic*, represents the first *philosophical* inquiry into the attraction of violence and death.² Plato treats this strange attraction as a highly effective clue, which can help us understand the constitution of human nature. While the fascination with death and violence derives from *appetites*, the resistance towards this fascination springs from *reason*. The resolution of this existential conflict depends on the *will*, on whether it will side with appetites or reason. And thus, for Plato, a philosophical account of morbid curiosity can generate nothing less than an answer to the question concerning human nature itself. According to Plato, this nature is composed of three parts: appetites, will, and reason.

Without denying the groundbreaking significance of Plato's reflections, I would nonetheless contend that the story of Leontius is not without its shortcomings. This account does not bring to light that even when *considered apart from the moral conflicts it gives rise to*, morbid curiosity is a distinctly *human* phenomenon. It would seem that in the framework of Plato's account, animal nature, which is exclusively ruled by appetites and does not encounter any resistance from reason, would have to represent morbid curiosity in its most pure form, without any amalgamations or limitations. Yet the truth is just the reverse: *the fascination with the gruesome has no place in the world of non-human animals; this unsettling fascination is a uniquely human phenomenon.*

From Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*, as developed in the *Poetics*, one can derive a more precise understanding of symbolic violence. According to Aristotle, it is not only reason, but also the *unique instinct for mimesis* that marks the difference between the human and the animal worlds.³ It thereby becomes understandable why morbid curiosity has no place in the non-human world: this curiosity derives from an instinct that animals lack: the instinct for *mimesis*, i.e., the desire to understand the world through imitation and representation. The evidence Aristotle brings forth to corroborate this view is indeed telling: 'Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies' (Aristotle 2001: 1448b). In short, morbid curiosity serves a 'cognitive function' and therefore, it is a distinctly *human* phenomenon.

Yet can the phenomenon of morbid curiosity be circumscribed within the horizon of understanding? Consider the overwhelming power that car accidents have to slow down traffic or the whole genre of action flicks and horror films: in these actual and virtual frameworks, morbid curiosity is undeniably present, yet just as undeniably it serves no cognitive function. What sense is one to make of this fascination with the gruesome, which so often escapes the confines of *mimesis*?

Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* provides a further model of explanation. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle employs this notion to explain the impact that tragedy has upon its audience. According to Aristotle, tragedy is 'an imitation of an action ... with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions' (Aristotle 2001: 1449b). *Catharsis* is the purification, cleansing or purgation of unpleasant emotions that the

audience experiences when confronted with the representations of human actions and the pain and suffering they give rise to. Such a conception of emotional discharge, built as it is upon one's exposure to the Other's pain and suffering, provides further means to clarify the appeal of death and violence. Morbid curiosity serves not only a mimetic, but also a cathartic function: besides enriching understanding, it can also purge one of unpleasant emotions and thereby 'cure' the audience by restoring psychic health.

Yet the cathartic interpretation has its own problems. Morbid curiosity can serve a cathartic function only if it purges the audience of negative emotions. However, as George Gerbner has demonstrated in his well-known studies of television audience, the exposure to images of death and violence does not relieve the spectators of fear and anxiety, but on the contrary, it gives rise to 'an epidemic of fear' (Gerbner 1994) — a sense of intense anxiety the majority of spectators come to experience as they start (consciously or unconsciously) anticipating similar events to unfold in their surroundings to the ones they have witnessed in the media.

In short, neither the mimetic, nor the cathartic interpretations suffice; they contradict the evidence of experience and leave too much unexplained.

Dominant Accounts in Psychology

The available psychological literature brings to light a mosaic of complementary and competing explanations. Intellectually, the most stimulating answers come from classical psychological resources, in particular from Freud's and Jung's works.

For Freud, the pertinent anxieties provoked by the representations of pain in the media concern not the collective, but the personal unconscious; they are determined not phylogenetically, but ontogenetically. The anxieties in question derive from experiences undergone in childhood, especially those experiences which accompany sexual development. The representations of pain revive repressed infantile complexes; they restore the primitive beliefs one might think one has long overcome.

Dolf Zillmann has convincingly shown that, as far as the appeal of violent imagery is concerned, out of all the concepts employed by Freud, 'it is the

sex-transcending concept of *identification* that proved more influential than any other single concept' (Zillmann 1998: 189). A critical appropriation of this concept, which Freud developed in connection with Oedipus complex, provides one with the basis to contend that the spectator has the means to identify himself both with fictitious heroes and anti-heroes and thereby vicariously experience all the gratifications that the protagonists live through. Identification with fictitious Others enables the spectator to transcend the limits of personal experience and to gain access to the pleasures experienced by Others — pleasures, which the spectator had always wanted to, although never could, live through. The spectator — that 'poor soul to whom nothing of importance seems to happen ... and who longs to feel and to act and to arrange things according to his desires' (Freud 1987: 656-657)⁴ — shares the euphoric as well as dysphoric experiences of his heroes and thereby attains the fulfillment of his thwarted wishes.

The spectators have the freedom to pick and choose the heroes or anti-heroes they want to identify with. The freedom to enter and exit the lives of Others enables the spectators to identify themselves either with the aggressors or with the victims and thereby consider the displays of violence either as desolate or entertaining. The concept of identification leads the analysts of the Freudian bent to proclaim that the exposure to symbolic violence keep societal violence in check by enabling the spectators to live through violent dramas in the fictional realm (Buruma 1984).

By contrast, for Jung the appeal of violent imagery concerns not the personal, but the collective unconscious; this appeal has phylogenetic, rather than ontogenetic origins. Building one's case on Jung's distinction between the personal and the collective unconscious (Jung 2014: 55-69), one is motivated to contend that the spectacles of pain provide the subject of experience with indirect access to its own collective instincts. Insofar as they are collective, the instincts in question are *pre-human* and *pre-moral*. Our fascination with symbolic violence serves the function of exposing us to *animal* instincts, which we all share yet which we all want to cover up, since they pose a threat to the specifically moral dimension of human life. In its own turn, this disclosure of animal instincts serves a *therapeutic function*: presumably, it enables one to become a better person.

As seen from the perspective of present-day psychology, the Freudian and Jungian accounts of the appeal of symbolic violence are instances of

sweeping claims and pseudo-explanations.⁵ This is because the accounts in question cannot be verified using established psychological means of verification. Yet what are the more recent answers, which have surpassed the Freudian and Jungian perspectives? In comparison with the Freudian and Jungian accounts, the more recent approaches are lamentably fractional. Without any pretenses to do more than they accomplish, these accounts single out a few characteristics that belong to the phenomenon under scrutiny, thereby leaving the whole phenomenon unaccounted for.⁶

Nowadays, the most popular answer is of an *economic* nature. This answer suggests that our fascination with the representations of the gruesome is 'not a reflection of freedom or preference', but rather is 'the product of a complex manufacturing and marketing machine. Mergers, consolidation, conglomeratization and globalization fuel the machine' (Gerbner 1994: 393). Pain sells; in fact, it appears to overcome all the cultural, geographical, historical and linguistic boundaries, and for this reason, it sells anywhere, anytime.

Besides pointing their fingers at economic interests, psychologists also suggest that the craving for the spectacles of pain derives from what Marvin Zuckerman has called *sensation seeking*, or what one could also call a *pursuit of excitement* on the part of the audience. Psychologists also point out that the audience's willingness to assure itself that it has *control* over visualized events constitutes an irreducible component of the enjoyment that accompanies the depictions of violence.⁷ We are also reminded of the significance of the *plot*, i.e., the significance of the *awareness that good will prevail over evil*.⁸ The audience's willingness to witness the protagonist's *passionate commitment* to his goals constitutes yet another reason that underlies the fascination with symbolic violence. Finally, as Jeffrey Goldstein has put it, the leap into *imaginary worlds*, be these worlds created by literature, film, television, play, or sports, also 'help explain the tolerance for, if not the attraction of, violent imagery' (Goldstein 1999: 275).⁹

These recent psychological findings do not pretend to lift the last veil that covers the human fascination with symbolic violence. This reticence is exactly what underlies the positivistic optimism of psychological research, for it enables one to claim that 'future research will undoubtedly achieve a better understanding of the conditions that control the appeal of portrayals of violence' (Zillmann 1998: 210). This optimism relies on the assumption that future research will follow the same methodological guidelines that

characterize the dominant trends in contemporary psychology. Yet if it is true that the whole is not reducible to the sum of its parts, then the positivistic orientation of current psychological research will never enable one to grasp the phenomenon under scrutiny in terms of its unity and wholeness. The *partes extra partes* approach might very well bring to light the so-far unnoticed features of our fascination with the gruesome, yet the question concerning what binds these features with each other will nonetheless remain missing.

Although Freud's and Jung's accounts were incomparably more comprehensive than the more recent studies, they nonetheless share a different weakness. The problem with these classical accounts is not so much their irreducibility to the level of positivistic methodology, but their incompatibility with the evidence of experience. Both the Jungian and the Freudian accounts suggest that our exposure to the representations of pain serves a therapeutic function in that it curtails the human desire for *actual* violence. This view appears to be unjustifiable.¹⁰

We are thus in need of an alternative. In what follows, I will aim to defend a position that could significantly supplement available interpretations by providing them with what they currently lack, viz., with a comprehensive account of the craving for the spectacles of pain, an account, moreover, which does not contradict either psychological findings, or the evidence of experience.

Methodological Considerations

My goal here is to build a phenomenological interpretation by using the resources of genetic phenomenology. Methodologically, I will follow Husserl's genetic path to the reduction that leads through psychology. I will especially rely on the method of *intentional implications*, which I will interpret as consisting of three consecutive steps.

The first step relies upon the commitment to initiate one's analysis with the performance of the phenomenological (rather than transcendental) reduction. Instead of beginning with the suspension of the world-thesis, one should begin more modestly, by turning to specific phenomena and by subjecting these and only these phenomena to the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction.¹¹ While before this step is taken, phenomena

are understood as *natural entities*, the methods of *epoché* and the reduction transform them into *unities of sense*. The first step is thus a transition from (naturalistically preconceived) beings to (phenomenologically interpreted) meanings.

The second step relies upon the realization that insofar as phenomena are unities of sense, they must be intentional accomplishments of subjectivity. At the beginning of one's analysis, the exact nature of these accomplishments cannot be determined. Thus the new task becomes that of identifying these accomplishments. These accomplishments cannot be described intuitively; they need to be *discovered*. This is because the correlation that binds unities of sense and the life of subjectivity does not lend itself to an immediate intuitive description. What must the life of subjectivity be like if it is to intend such and such unities of sense? To take the first step is to offer object-oriented descriptions of the phenomena under scrutiny. To take the second step is to turn from the phenomena to the subjective life in which they are constituted.

The third step is meant to bridge the gap that remains open between the first two steps of analysis. While the first step was object-oriented and the second one subject-oriented, to take the third step is to draw further intentional implications that concern the correlation between the phenomena in question and the conscious as well as unconscious life of subjectivity.

How exactly would one apply this methodological orientation while analyzing representations of symbolic violence? To take the first step is to ask: what is the phenomenon under scrutiny? The appeal of symbolic violence, conceived as an effect of motivation, rather than causation, is the phenomenon under consideration. Secondly, what are the conscious or unconscious intentional orientations that render this phenomenon possible? Although I have already sketched a number of possible answers, not a single one is without difficulties, and thus, at least at the beginning, one must place these answers within brackets.

At the start, one can only say: the appeal of symbolic violence must be correlated with a particular craving, desire, or striving. However, when it comes to a more precise determination of this striving, no answer is self-evident. The correlation between the appeal of symbolic violence and the craving, desire, or striving that lie at its basis cannot be established

intuitively. Not being able to rely on pure intuition, one must turn to the method of intentional implications. In this regard, my thesis will be as follows: our irresistible craving for the spectacles of pain derives from a desire that is deeply ingrained in human nature itself, i.e., the *desire to liberate ourselves from the ineluctable grip that pain has upon us*.

As far as the third methodological step is concerned, one needs to ask: what exactly is the correlation that binds the subjective strivings and the appeal of symbolic violence? In this regard, I will argue that the appeal of symbolic violence is correlated with the desire to *express the inexpressible, escape the inescapable, and transfer the non-transferable*.

The second and the third points call for a more elaborate clarification. In the next section, I would like to begin with the second issue.

Phenomenology of Symbolic Violence

According to my central thesis, the craving for representations of symbolic violence derives from a desire to liberate oneself from the ineluctable grip of pain. So as to provide this claim with phenomenological support, I would like to address a peculiar kind of senselessness humans are bound to experience when confronted with severe long-lasting pain. In this regard, F.J.J. Buytendijk's distinction between pain and suffering, which he draws in his *Pain: Its Modes and Functions*, will enable us to qualify the senselessness in question with greater precision.

In contrast to the established view, Buytendijk argues that the senselessness that pain gives rise to is more radical than the senselessness derived from suffering, for while suffering is tied to images, pain announces the breakdown of all images. Why does a human being suffer? He suffers because he has lost someone he loves, or because of guilt that stems from the mistakes he has made, or because of the unfortunate conditions he finds himself in — in short, because he cannot liberate himself from images that haunt him, images that oppose his plans, desires, or aspirations. By contrast, the senselessness of pain does not derive from images that resist the sense one has infused one's world with. While suffering is accompanied with senseless images, the experience of severe pain announces the breakdown of all images. While suffering is always about something, or because of something, pain is not about anything. Pain intrudes upon one's life as the

experience of sheer negativity accompanied with the breakdown of all images, and it forces one to ask: Why me, why now? So as to answer these questions, one would need to discover at the heart of pain precisely what it does not seem to have, viz., to discover that the breakdown of all images is not as radical as it seems to be, that there is a sense hidden behind the apparent senselessness of pain. However, being free from all images, pain lies on the other side of all reasonable explanations, and thus, the experience of pain turns out to be an experience of what Buytendijk describes as a 'conflict with the fundamental reasonableness of life' (Buytendijk 1962: 26).

One could argue that Buytendijk's distinction is too rough in that it does not take into account diverse forms of suffering. Consider severe cases of anxiety, melancholia, or depression: much like severe pain, they expose the subject of experience to the senseless world that is emptied of all images — a world of pure sensibility that is filled with sheer negativity in the absence of any apprehension or interpretation. Yet even if one concedes that Buytendijk's distinction calls for some significant modifications, it nonetheless remains true that his phenomenological description brings to light one of the most disturbing consequences of severe pain, viz., *radical senselessness* that derives from the breakdown of all images.

From this phenomenological description one can draw an important intentional implication. If it is indeed true that the experience of pain marks our exposure to the radical senselessness of life, then there seems to be no better way to counteract pain's seemingly ineluctable hold than by transforming pain itself into an image, thereby reasserting one's freedom from its terrifying effects. It thereby becomes understandable why, as Ernst Jünger puts it, 'the individual has a desire to situate pain in the realm of chance, in a zone one can avoid and evade or at the very least need not be subject to according to the laws of necessity' (Jünger 2008: 2). The desire to escape pain's ineluctable grip is what underlies the attempt to transpose pain into the virtual domain. Against such a background, the proliferation of the spectacles of pain are to be conceived as expressions of a concerted effort to name the unnamable, describe the non-describable, disclose in images precisely what escapes all images. In short, the spectacles of pain mark the attempt to proclaim victory over pain's destructive effects and thereby resolve 'the conflict with the fundamental reasonableness of life'.

Yet how exactly is this resolution to be effected? The implications I just drew call for a further clarification. With this in mind, I would like to proceed from the second to the third step and turn to the three different forms that the attempts to liberate oneself from the senselessness of pain can give rise to.

(1) How am I to liberate myself from the hold that the senselessness of pain has upon me? While it might be hardly credible to deny pain's actuality, it is more promising to reject its senselessness. We thereby come across the first form of liberation, the project to *express the inexpressible*. The representations of pain can become resolute attempts to understand what lies at the limits of understanding. They can be triggered by the hypothesis that pain has something important to tell us just as surely as we do not want to find out what it is. They can be motivated by the belief that there is a sense hidden behind the apparent senselessness of pain and that this sense can be disclosed only if pain finds appropriate modes of representation. In short, one can address pain as a *disclosive phenomenon* and aim to give expression to what lies at the limits of expressibility.

(2) Besides being triggered by the desire to express the inexpressible, the representations of pain can be also motivated by the aim to *escape the inescapable*. This is the second form that qualifies representations of pain, conceived as projects of liberation. In this regard, representations of pain become embodiments of *bad faith*. They become forms of escapism that constitute a false sense of distance and security, which provide the basis to delude oneself that pain is neither ineluctable nor necessary. To borrow a metaphor from Ernst Jünger, this bad faith enables one to feast and stroll like Sinbad the Sailor on the back of an enormous fish one mistakes for an island, for one's desires and aspirations notwithstanding, *nothing is more certain and unavoidable than pain*. Like the swing of a pendulum, the representations of pain oscillate between these two possibilities of either expressing the inexpressible, or escaping the inescapable.

(3) The attempt to *transfer the non-transferable* constitutes the third direction that is opened by the irresistible desire to escape the grip of pain. This third direction derives from the same logic that underlies *sadism*. The logic of sadism suggests: either others, or me; there is no third alternative. It is either I who must suffer, or it is my victim, whose suffering I myself must cause and control. If I fail to inflict pain in others, I will have to bear it

myself. The only way I can alleviate my pain is by transferring it to someone else.

We commit a vital error when we think that the sadist's attitude toward Others is marked by indifference. Quite on the contrary, as C. Fred Alford and, following him, Arne Johan Vetlesen have argued, the sadist, far from being indifferent to Others, identifies himself with his victims and 'lives their pain'. Without such identification, which entails a peculiar kind of 'co-feeling' of the pain of the Other, the sadistic act would be pointless, for it is driven by the need to find the Other to whom the sadist could transfer his own pain. In such a way, sadism turns out to be sadomasochism.

The logic that underlies the craving for the spectacles of pain is in principle no different. Just as the sadist, the spectator does not dehumanize virtual others who are now in pain. Quite on the contrary, he identifies himself with them as he suffers their pain, without, however, feeling any pain. The spectator thereby experiences the impossible: pain that does not hurt and suffering that does not distress. Just as the sadist, the spectator is fully aware that the virtual Others are in pain, and it is this very awareness that gives rise to his comfort, pleasure, and satisfaction, which are filled with the delusion that, supposedly, the spectator is free from pain. Thus the experience of pain that colors the face of the virtual Other reassure the spectator of his own freedom from pain. Just like the sadist, the spectator was also faced with only two alternatives — either Others or him. Symbolic violence enables the spectator to transfer the non-transferrable and thereby liberate himself from his own pain.

Contemporary Forms of Symbolic Violence

It seems that this account is too general to capture the specific features characteristic of contemporary representations of pain in the media. After all, what are Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* — eighty-three etchings made between 1810 and 1820 — if not attempts to express the inexpressible? And could one not say the same about Hieronymus Bosch's paintings describing hell or earthly delights, Pieter Bruegel's oil-panel describing beggars, or Hans Ulrich Franck's etchings that depict soldiers killing peasants? Or consider Baudelaire's descriptions of the bourgeois of the mid-nineteenth-century sitting down for breakfast with newspapers in their hands, which describe 'wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil

deeds of princes, of nations, of private individuals'¹²: what is this desire to wash down one's breakfast with 'an orgy of universal atrocity' if not an attempt to *escape the inescapable* and *transfer the non-transferrable*? In short, is there anything that makes contemporary forms of symbolic violence *distinctive*? Is there anything that makes them *stand out* from other modes of pain's representations? We are in need of further intentional implications, which I would like to draw by turning back to Ernst Jünger's analysis.

To the best of my knowledge, Jünger's *On Pain*, having been completed in 1934, is an unprecedented attempt in print to reflect on how the technological changes in Europe of the twentieth century derive from a transformed relation to pain. According to Jünger, our technical capacity to represent pain in films or photographs is itself expressive of a more radical tendency to objectify life — a tendency, which itself marks a radical attempt to transfer the non-transferrable, i.e., to liberate oneself from pain.

This is something that calls for a strong emphasis: *the objectification of life is not reducible to symbolic representations*. Most importantly, the objectification of life marks a transformed relation to one's actual body, i.e., the ever-increasing capacity to objectify one's body. This is what Ernst Jünger calls *the birth of the second consciousness*, i.e., a 'cold' and 'indubitably cruel' (Jünger 2008: 38, 45) consciousness of a non-participating observer, who in a curious way has succeeded in unfastening all ties to the body. According to Jünger, photography, films, sports, work, the erotic, and finally, medicine, are all direct expressions of the objectification of life, they are all consequences that stem from a novel approach to the body, an approach that is indicative of a fundamentally novel relation to pain.

This means that what I have identified as the logic of sadism, i.e., the transference of pain to the Other, is not reducible to the diffusion of pain into the virtual domain. It is as though the consciousness of the 1930s is fully aware of what we seem to have forgotten, viz., that *the project of transferring pain to the virtual Other cannot deliver what it aims to deliver: it cannot alleviate one's pain*. With this realization, we come to confront the possibility that was pursued in 'the last and indeed quite remarkable phase of nihilism' (Jünger 2008: 46), i.e., the totalitarian age. This nihilistic possibility invites one to radicalize the project of pain's transference by no longer limiting it to the virtual domain. The possibility of such a prospect underlies Jünger's disturbing predictions and the no-less disturbingly accurate implications he draws from them: as he puts it in 1934, 'we see the

valleys and plains full of armies, military deployments, and exercises. We see states more hostile and ready for war than ever before ... their essential aim is no longer in doubt..... The practical consequence for the individual is ... the necessity to commit oneself to the preparation for war' (Jünger 2008: 45, 47).

Jünger interpreted the early signs of the approaching war as necessary consequences that followed life's self-objectification, i.e., that followed the birth of the second consciousness, which in its own turn was a consequence that followed the need to liberate oneself from pain by transferring it not only to virtual, but also to actual Others. Everything in Jünger is built upon the realization that 'man is able to resist the assault of pain to the degree that he is capable of self-detachment' (Jünger, 2008: 46). Given such a central role assigned to pain, it becomes understandable why Jünger would proclaim: 'Tell me your relation to pain and I will tell you who you are!' (Jünger 2008: 1)

Our times have changed. At least in the affluent corners of the globe, humanity once again inhabits the values of a world, which Jünger believed the children who would live to experience the year 2000 would not even remember. Humanity inhabits the *world of security*, thereby disproving one of Jünger's central predictions. In direct contrast to Jünger's central expectation, the age of security was not superseded by a totalitarian age, which combines the values of technology with a 'cold consciousness', which sees its own body as an object and therefore manifests a soulless indifference to its own pain. Rather, if one were to characterize our attitude to pain in one word, one could state that *this attitude is profoundly and irreducibly paradoxical*. Our irresistible craving for the spectacle of pain, which has only intensified over the last eighty years, now walks hand-in-hand with the incapacity to tolerate pain around us. While in the virtual domain we cannot live without pain, in our actual surroundings we find it hard to stomach even its most basic manifestations.

Thus on the one hand, we are engaged in a project of creating a world in which pain can manifest itself only behind closed doors. The explosion of hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, and pain centers in cities on all corners of the globe is indicative of the growing tendency in the present-day world to exclude, at least as much as possible, the manifestation of pain and suffering from our normally functioning social lives. Yet on the other hand, our ongoing battle to render public spaces 'pain free' contrasts sharply with

the booming spectacles of pain. The excruciations of war, civil unrest, torturous lives in inner cities, and various other forms physical and psychological pain have become for us a daily banality, so much so that according to a common sentiment, in the present-day world the so-called secondary experiences are taking over and marginalizing primary experiences. In the words of Susan Sontag (which she subsequently qualified as a merely conservative critique), we are losing the capacity to react.

Thus along with Jünger, one can say: 'Our relation to pain has indeed changed' (Jünger 2008: 45). Yet in contrast to Jünger, one could not say that the new spirit that has emerged among us is 'indubitably cruel,' in that it 'dispenses with the soft spots and hardens the points of resistance' (Jünger 2008: 45). Rather, what makes our relation to pain unique is this very contrast between our unprecedented sensitivity to the manifestation of pain in the actual surroundings and our unmatched craving for the virtual spectacles of pain. For Jünger, the cruelty of his age was based on the realization that the project of transferring one's pain to the virtual domain could not reach fulfillment. By contrast, we appear to be convinced of the futility and illegitimacy of transferring our pain to those who find themselves in our actual world, who live their lives just as we do ours. When the unprecedented explosion of pain's representation in the media is juxtaposed to its elimination in our actual lifeworlds, the following conclusion appears irresistible: we are engaged in a process of transferring the experience of pain into the virtual domain with its distinctive spatiotemporality, which in principle remains disconnected from the actual space and actual time that characterize our actual lives in our actual lifeworlds. It is therefore only to be expected that for us, the goal of *escaping the inescapable* and *transferring the non-transferrable* would take precedence over the goal of *expressing the inexpressible*. For this very reason, it is hard to overlook the striking superficiality of the contemporary representations of pain in the media, especially when these modes of representation are compared with the classical representations of pain in art, literature, philosophy or religion.

Some Objections

So as to avoid some misunderstandings, I would like to consider three objections. (1) The first of them derives from Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population, living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment.... It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. (Sontag 2003: 110)

Is the position I have just presented not subject to this criticism? Not at all. I do not argue that reality has become a spectacle, just as I do not suggest that there is no real suffering in the world. My thesis does not deny the reality of suffering but rather addresses the audience's *desires* and *aspirations*, which underlie the craving for the spectacles of pain. According to my thesis, in its contemporary form, the seemingly irresistible appeal of violent imagery is to be understood as an ongoing endeavor, which aims to deny the undeniable and convert pain into an illusion. My claim would be subject to Sontag's critique only if I argued that we have successfully turned our dreams into reality. Yet this is not the view that I hold. As I have suggested above, the hold that pain has upon us is ineliminable, and it is so not only among those who 'do not have the luxury of patronizing reality', but also among the 'consumers of violence as spectacle' (Sontag 2003: 111).

Yet just as the reality of pain and suffering cannot be denied, so also one cannot ignore the startling contrast between the declining visibility of pain in our actual surroundings and its mounting representations in the media. Anthropological and historical research corroborates the claim that the decline of pain is accompanied by the ascent of its image. As Geoffrey Gorer noted in his seminal essay 'The Pornography of Death', 'While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences' (Gorer 1955: 51). More recently, Vicki Goldberg, one of the leading voices in photography history and criticism, has corroborated and broadened Gorer's claim by suggesting that the project of irrealizing death is a historical process, which is at least a few hundred years old. Her research highlights the overwhelming contrast that marks the human exposure to pain, suffering, and death in the eighteenth-century Europe and North America, on the one hand, and the age of mechanical reproduction, on the other (Goldberg 1998). The declining child mortality rates, the steadily ascending life expectancy, the abolition of public executions, the remarkable medical discoveries, such as the anti-bacterial drugs, penicillin, treatment of

tuberculosis, or the polio vaccine, the relocation of death from homes to hospitals as well as the relocation of cemeteries from town centers to the countryside — all these striking phenomena seem to leave no doubt that in the course of the last few hundred years, pain, suffering and death have been gradually withdrawing from our everyday surroundings. Yet as Goldberg has it, ‘as actual death was toned down by every means available, *depicted* death swaggered violently onto the stage, and the new means and forms were found to keep it before the public eye’ (Goldberg 1998: 40). It is this very contrast, as I have suggested above, that marks the unique characteristic of our relation to the spectacles of pain, a characteristic which becomes more understandable when seen as a *tendency* to irrealize pain, as a willingness to transform it into an illusion.

(2) Yet how could one ignore the plain fact that the technological discoveries of the last century have led not only to the rapid withdrawal of pain, suffering, and death from our surroundings, but also to their unprecedented proliferation? Never before has humanity faced the possibility of its own extinction and thus never before has it been confronted with the ethical task to act so that the effects of its actions would be compatible with the furtherance of human life (Jonas 1984: 11). Clearly, if Goldberg’s thesis is to retain its credibility, it must be accompanied with some important qualifications. Instead of speaking of the withdrawal of death and dying from view, one should rather speak of their overwhelming presence during the times of war and their *deceptive* withdrawal during the times of peace. Or rather, instead of speaking of the toning of actual death ‘by every means available’ (Goldberg 1998: 40), it appears more reasonable to appropriate another of Goldberg’s expressions and speak of the waxing and waning of death in our actual lifeworlds.

Yet does this critique and subsequent qualification of Goldberg’s thesis not compel me to retract one of my own central claims, viz., *the claim concerning the marked contrast between the overwhelming presence of irreal pain and its surprising absence in our surroundings*? The devastating and continuously rising overpopulation as well as the inevitable shortage of food and water, the effects of human action on the environment as well as the problem of energy, the continuous presence of war as well as other forms of violent unrest all leave us in no doubt with regard to the reality of pain, suffering, and death. In the face of these phenomena, does it make sense to speak of a contrast between the steady waning of actual pain and the waxing of its irreal representations?

I would still argue that it does, and for three reasons. (i) Despite the obvious severity of the outlined problems, it nonetheless remains the case that the actual visibility of pain, suffering, and death has severely diminished over the last few hundred years. Suffice it to note that the general life expectancy in Europe and North America has grown more than twofold during the last two centuries and that this growth was accompanied with the discovery of the cure for numerous diseases (polio, smallpox, typhoid, yellow fever, tuberculosis, influenza, and pneumonia, to name the most common), whose regular presence marked pain's constant presence and life's daily unpredictability. The severity of the global problems we now confront cannot cover up the undeniable fact that in the course of the last few centuries, our *daily* exposure to pain has undergone an unprecedented reduction. (ii) One cannot ignore that the outlined problems obtain their full-fledged visibility precisely in the virtual domain. In the absence of the media, we would hardly be aware of them. Thus paradoxically, at least in the times of peace, they mark not so much the presence of pain in our surroundings but contribute to the overwhelming presence of the imagery of pain. (iii) To be sure, the outlined problems are pending. They do not lie in the distant and unreachable future, but are experienced here and now. Nonetheless, there remains an overwhelming and undeniable contrast between how the outlined problems are represented in the media and how they are experienced in our surrounding worlds. The global problems that haunt us nowadays are of course real, yet their reality is just as undeniable as the fact that they appear with a flavor of unreality.¹³ With these three reasons in mind, I would contend that *in the times of peace*, the outlined problems reaffirm the contrast between the sterility of our environments and the overwhelming profusion of the imagery of pain. Of course, the sterility in question is *deceptive*, just as the wish to liberate life from pain is *unrealizable*.

(3) The third set of objections derives from a peculiar ethical tension that the spectators are prone to experience in the face of symbolic violence. Sharon Sliwinski has recently addressed the main contours of this tension. In what follows, I will build on her analysis, while at the same time suggesting that the tension in question calls for a more nuanced set of distinctions and for a somewhat different resolution.

(i) Let us begin with dismay and aversion one is bound to experience when exposed to symbolic violence. As Sliwinski puts it, there is 'the moment of

recognition, the wounding paralysis, the horror and revulsion one feels when struck by an image of suffering' (Sliwinski 2004: 154). With a reference to Freud, one could characterize this experience as an instance of *identification*, of an emotional bond that ties different persons, a bond that can even take the form of an ego-confusion, which enables one to access the targeted Other's pleasures or pains. Alternatively, with a reference to Max Scheler, one could further characterize this emotional tie as an instance of *emotional infection*, comparable to what a football fan experiences in the stadium, or what a loyalist experiences in a political rally.

(ii) Secondly, let us admit that this moment of identification can serve as a motive for the awakening of moral sentiments. I am referring here to the emergence of a sense of a moral obligation towards Others, an obligation, which derives from the realization that when it comes to photographs, documentaries, or news reports, even though one has witnessed the pain of Others in the virtual realm, the pain one has witness is by no means virtual. It therefore seems that one carries the same kind of obligations towards such virtual manifestations of pain as one does to its actual manifestations. In short, one cannot rest content with the mere identification of the Others' pain; one needs to do all one can to alleviate the Other's suffering.

(iii) At this stage, it might seem that moral considerations oppose one of my central points of contention, viz., the claim that symbolic violence is representative of a drive that strives to transform pain into an illusion. This contention now appears questionable: insofar as we are capable of *morally* relating to the Other in pain, we interpret virtual manifestations of pain through the lens of *actuality*. In response to this objection, I would maintain that the outlined emergence of moral sentiments is soon surpassed by a growing sense of disillusionment. This dawning sense of disenchantment derives from the realization that there is very little one can do to alleviate the Other's suffering. Or as Sliwinski puts it, 'The helplessness and horror of bearing witness to suffering brings with it the demand for a *response*, and yet one's response to photographs can do nothing to alleviate the suffering depicted' (Sliwinski 2004: 154). Such is the case for two closely related reasons.

The first reason pertains to the unique spatiotemporality that qualifies symbolic violence. The scenes and images unfold in a virtual domain, i.e., in a domain that remains cut off from the spatiotemporality of our actual lifeworlds. It is this very distance that renders our ethical obligation

unrealizable. The moral obligations call for an *urgent* response. They demand that I respond to the Other not some day in the future, but *here* and *now*. Yet the distance that separates the virtual from the actual blocks the possibility of an *immediate* response. My response can only come too late; it cannot accomplish what it strives to accomplish.

The second reason concerns the unrelenting proliferation of symbolic violence. The media robs us of the capacity to respond to the pain of Others precisely because it generates a non-stop feed of the pain and suffering of Others. For instance, thanks to research undertaken by George Gerbner, we know that an average American child will have watched 8,000 murders on television by the age of twelve. To which of the 8,000 murders is the child supposed to respond? If he has the ethical responsibility to respond to some of these acts of cruelty and injustice, should he not also be obliged to respond to others? What are the criteria in accordance with which he will pick and choose? And will he ever be in the position to ethically justify his indifference to those he has chosen to ignore? In short, while the sight of the Other in pain calls for an ethical response, the very fact that one is exposed to a nonstop feed of Others in pain renders an ethical response embarrassingly unfair and insubstantial.

(iv) Yet fourthly, the recognition of the limits that circumscribe the possibilities of a response need not lead one to the conclusion that all responses are in vain. This disconcerting realization need not signify the fruitlessness of all action, but could be conceived as a possibility to rethink the limits and significance of ethical responsibility. By this I mean that even though a response can never be adequate to the initial call, it is nonetheless better than no response at all. Moreover, despite the disconcerting limits that affect the response, it nonetheless is an ethical response. It is at this stage that we come to face Sliwinski's conclusion: 'this painful labour of *attending* to other's suffering might be the very beginning of responsibility itself (Sliwinski 2004: 162).

(v) This conclusion once again brings into question the validity of my contention concerning the illusory nature of the representations of pain. It once again seems that moral consciousness breaks through the virtual limits that circumscribe the spectacles of pain. Nonetheless, I would suggest that Sliwinski's thesis (notwithstanding all the caution in its formulation) calls for some significant modifications and extrapolations. First and foremost, one has to admit that the spectator's exposure to the spectacles of pain *need*

not give rise to moral obligations. Clearly, one can continue to enjoy symbolic violence in the absence of any sense of moral responsibility. Secondly, even if violent imagery gives rise to moral sentiments, all too often these sentiments either cover up the Other's singularity, or turn away from the Other altogether despite the pretense entailed in the language of moral responsibility. While the first of these points appears to be self-evident, the second one calls for a further clarification.

What exactly is 'this painful labour of attending to the (virtual) Other's suffering?' What are the exact forms that it takes? All too often, by initiating a transition from the virtual to the actual domain, moral consciousness empties the Other of all interiority by interpreting the Other as an instance that represents a particular cause of suffering. As Feldman has insightfully put it, after placing the suffering of the Other back into the actual world, we encounter 'generalities of bodies – dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless In their pervasive depersonalization, [they appear as] anonymous corporeality' (cited in Malkki 1996: 388). Elizabeth Dauphinee confirms this insight when she argues that the attempt to morally respond to the suffering of those we have encountered in the virtual realm follows an 'iconography of symbols that stand in for pain and thus become the representational alibis for actual pain: images of starvation, of emaciated concentration-camp victims, of hooded prisoners, of broken and bleeding skins, of blood-stained floors in prison cells, and so on' (Dauphinee 2007: 142).

This process of anonymization of the Other's pain and suffering and the iconography of symbols it gives rise to does not only cover up the Other's singularity. In fact, all too often it simply turns away from the Other altogether. As Frank Möller has recently argued while addressing the notorious Abu Ghraib photographs, 'regarding the general Western debate in newspapers, articles, and books, the focus was largely 'on ourselves', not on the victims. The Abu Ghraib photographs thus ... did not help the viewers to grasp how what had happened at Abu Ghraib was experienced and felt by the inmates' (Möller 2009: 185). On the one hand, no photograph could fill the gap between the viewer's perception and the actual experience of the inmates. On the other hand, even the attempt to fill this gap was missing: 'the debate did not focus on the victims and their pain' (Möller 2009: 185).

Thus alongside Sliwinski's contention that attending to the virtual Other's suffering *might* signal the birth of moral responsibility, one should also stress that all too often moral consciousness does not overcome, but only reinforces the distance of the virtual representations of pain. This consciousness robs the Other-in-pain of singularity, flattens his suffering by transforming it into a 'piece of evidence', 'which can be read and re-read in different ways toward the achievement of different narratives and projects' (Dauphinee 2007: 146). All too often moral consciousness takes pain hostage and categorizes it in accordance with the established iconography of pain. In its own roundabout way, it provides one with the means needed to *escape the inescapable* and *transfer the nontransferable* — although this time, the camera lens works as a sort of 'hooding' not of my own, but rather of the Other's inescapable vulnerability, the Other's exposure to what Buytendijk has so elegantly called 'the conflict with the fundamental reasonableness of life'.

Concluding Remarks

In place of a conclusion, I would like to turn to one more possible misunderstanding of the position I am here defending. My critique of the powers of moral consciousness to overcome the growing gap between actual pain and its symbolic representations can be misunderstood as a more or less concealed defense of iconoclasm. This is not the view that I hold. I do not suggest that moral consciousness is *in principle* incapable of reawakening the sense of moral responsibility. I would rather stress that the spectacles of pain are *irreducibly ambiguous* and for this reason, the claim that these spectacles can be safely subsumed by moral consciousness can never find convincing justification.

As Susan Sontag maintained in her *Regarding the Pain of Others*, during the war between the Serbs and the Croats in the early 1990s, the same photographs of killed children were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings (Sonntag 2003: 10). More recently, in the context of her analysis of Abu Ghraib photographs, Elizabeth Dauphinee maintained that the same photographs have been used to both condemn and excuse the politics that caused the suffering of the prisoners (Dauphinee 2007: 148). The spectacles of pain can play such diverse roles because their socio-political sense is in principle *underdetermined* and for this reason, their meaning up to a large degree depends on the texts that accompany them.

Yet the spectacles of pain are ambiguous not only because they can be used for different ends and purposes. *They are ambiguous not only in terms of how they are read, but also in terms of how they are seen.* This deeper sense of ambiguity lies at the heart of what I have characterized above as the desire for violent imagery, a desire, which can be conceived either as an attempt to *express the inexpressible*, or to *escape the inescapable*.

I would like to conclude with a suggestion, which in the present context I cannot carry out in all the necessary detail. I would contend that the possibility of violent images to awaken a sense of moral responsibility up to a large degree rests upon the spectator's capacity to engage in these images as attempts to express the Other's inimitable pain and suffering. This capacity to see the imagery of pain in such a fashion does not merely rest upon the 'painful labour of attending to the Other's suffering'. Rather, it also presupposes *the spectator's awareness of his own vulnerability* and is built upon what following Albert Schweitzer one could call *the fraternity of those in pain*.¹⁴ It seems to me that in the absence of such a sense of shared destiny, which goes along with the recognition of the inimitable nature of one's own and Other's experience, one is left merely with the generalities of bodies and iconography of symbols that empty the Other of all singularity and thereby increase the distance between the spectacles of pain and our actual lifeworlds. For this very reason, the phenomenological emphasis on the primacy of experience does not stand in the way of a responsible approach to the Other's suffering. Quite on the contrary, this attentiveness on the first-person experience on the part of the spectator proves indispensable if the 'painful labour of attending to the other's suffering' is to become 'the beginning of responsibility itself'.

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Notes

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² 'But, I said, I once heard a story which I believe, that Leontius the son of Aglaion, on his way up from the Piraeus under the outer side of the northern wall, becoming aware of dead bodies that lay at the place of public execution at the same time felt a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion, and that for a time he resisted and veiled his head, but overpowered in despite of all by his desire, with wide staring eyes he rushed up to the corpses and cried, 'There, ye wretches, take your fill of the fine spectacle!' (Plato 1961: 439e-440a)

³ 'Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation' (Aristotle 2001: 1448b).

⁴ The translation from German into English is Dolf Zillmann's, not my own (see Zillmann 1998: 190).

⁵ See Zillmann 1998: 182.

⁶ Jeffrey Goldstein's edited volume *Why We Watch* is a good case in point. On the one hand, one cannot ignore the pioneering nature of this work: it is the first book in print to raise the question concerning the attraction of symbolic violence. Yet what exactly are the conclusions that this book establishes? In his brief summary of the book's accomplishments, Goldstein writes: 'it is obvious that the attractions of violent imagery are many.... Some viewers seek excitement, others companionship or social acceptance through shared experience, and still others wish to see justice enacted. For some, the immersion in a fantasy world is its primary appeal' (Goldstein 1999: 222). Clearly, these answers leave the phenomenon up to a large degree unexplained: they clarify our tolerance for violent imagery, yet not its attraction. This is something that Goldstein himself acknowledges: 'What we don't know about the attractions of violent entertainment could fill a book' (223).

⁷ Some psychological case studies have shown that it suffices to place a remote control in a volunteer's hands to increase his capacity to both tolerate and enjoy violent imagery (See Goldstein 1999).

⁸ As Zillmann puts it, 'there can be little doubt, then, that righteous violence, however brutal but justified by the ends, will prompt gloriously intense euphoric reactions the more it is preceded by patently unjust and similarly brutal violence' (Zillmann 1998: 208).

⁹ To corroborate this thesis, Goldstein refers to McCauley's psychological test, which placed a group of university students in a room where they were supposed to watch three video tapes: of a slaughterhouse, of a monkey being killed and then served fresh to connoisseurs in China, and of a girl, whose face had been sliced open and the skin pulled off the skull. Most students found the videos unbearable and did not watch them to the end, although, according to McCauley and Goldstein, they would have more than likely watched them had the videos been representative of real animals and real people. In short, what the students were disturbed by were not the images themselves, but the realization that they witnessed the representations of real events.

¹⁰ Our exposure to the representations of pain has practical repercussions: close to 3,000 studies have been conducted before 1971 alone and they all suggest a strong connection between representations of violence in the media and aggression. Countless studies over the last forty years have confirmed these findings. Nor should one ignore the less disturbing (although a more widespread) consequence, which concerns the 'epidemic of fear' — an issue I have already dealt with above.

¹¹ Here I understand the *epoché* in the general way as a suspension of those judgments and pre-judgments that underlie one's unreflective commitments. Following this initial procedure, phenomenological reduction enables one lead the phenomena back (*reducere*) to their constitutive origins in the life of subjectivity.

¹² Here is Baudelaire's journal entry from the early 1860s: 'It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month of the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity.... Every newspaper ... is nothing but a tissue of horrors.... And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man daily washes down his morning repast'. (Quoted from Susan Sontag 2003: 107)

¹³ As Vicki Goldberg has put it in a somewhat different context, 'since everyone dies only once, watching the same people die over and over tends to erect one poor barricade against the reality of death' (Goldberg 1998: 39).

¹⁴ 'All through the world, there is a special league of those who have known anxiety and physical suffering. A mysterious bond connects those marked by pain. They know the terrible things that man can undergo; they know the longing to be free of pain. Those who have been liberated from pain must not now think they are now completely free again and can calmly return to life as it was before. With their experience of pain and anxiety, they

must help alleviate the pain and anxiety of others, insofar as that lies within human powers. They must bring release to others as they received release. (Schweitzer 1965: 7).