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Torture and the Sublime.

The Ethics of Physical Pain in Garaje Olimpo

Patricia Vieira / Harvard University

Physical pain is often described as an experience that eludes representation. In The Body in Pain Elaine Scarry emphasizes the unsharability of bodily suffering and identifies resistance to language as one of its essential attributes. A central consequence of the difficulty to verbally express pain is its invisibility. This characteristic becomes particularly unsettling in a situation of violence purposefully inflicted on others, since its insubstantiality allows for its dismissal as a side effect of a particular policy or government. A case in point is the ubiquitous use of torture by the dictatorial regimes of America's Southern Cone during the 1970s and 80s, when thousands were submitted to the practice, justified by abstract notions

such as “internal enemy” or “security of the state”. Scarry points to the potentially benign effect of expressing the pain imposed on oneself or on another, as a first step in unmasking its reality and in giving the tortured social and political representation.

There are many perspectives from which to articulate discourses on torture. Testimonies of victims and their families, reports by human rights agencies, social scientific research and documents produced during legal procedures are perhaps some of the more common texts on the subject. All these accounts share what Idelber Avelar describes as “authority to speak” (254). Their legitimacy arises either from being the result of personal experience or from their reference to juridical, political or scientific objectives. In the case of imaginary creations about physical pain the definition of authority is more complex. The fictionalization of the horror of violence leads to a questioning of the aesthetics and ethics of creative representations on this subject. In this essay I will analyze the fiction film Garaje Olimpo (1999), directed by Marco Bechis, which depicts the practice of torture during the Argentine dictatorship. I will argue that traditional concepts such as beauty are inapt to explicate the artistic language of the movie and make the case for the use of the notion of the sublime to interpret the aesthetic of horror it presents. In the first part of the essay I will go back to Immanuel Kant’s definition of sublimity and attempt to explain how this notion establishes a bridge between aesthetics and ethics in the movie. In the second section of the text I will focus on the representation of the suffering body. Following Edmund Burke’s reflections on the sublime I will try to show that the ethics of sublimity in Bechis’ film is rooted on the viewers’ physical response to the depiction of corporeal pain.

A crucial sequence in Garaje Olimpo occurs towards the end of the film. María (Antonella Costa) is on the first floor cleaning one of the cars when Texas (Pablo Razuk) leaves the building. In an extreme long shot that corresponds to an eyeline match from the perspective of the prisoners we realize that the door at the end of the garage has been left open. The intense light that enters through the small gap produces a strong contrast with the low-key illumination in the interior. María realizes that this is an opportunity to escape. She begins to run towards the door to the increasingly louder sound of a cello. The movement is emphasized by a series of jump cuts while the camera pans to follow her. She is filmed from the inside while she goes out and the shot continues frontally focusing on the open door.

The music stops and for several seconds the strong light coming from outside fills the screen. Shortly after, Texas enters the scene dragging María with him. He forces her to kneel down, points a gun at the back of her head and starts to count to ten. A high angle shot shows the situation from above and is followed by a cut to an extreme close-up of the girl's terrified face. Texas fires and María screams and falls forward; the representation of her drop to the floor is prolonged in time by three match of action shots that depict her fall from different angles. Only then does the viewer realize that Texas fired to the side and that María, lying on the floor, has not been killed.

This scene condenses many key elements of *Garaje Olimpo*. First, it emphasizes the dehumanizing treatment of prisoners. Texas grabs María by her hair and arm, as though she were an animal, and compares her to a bird who wishes to fly. It equally stresses the close relationship between torture and power, a connection that had already been pointed out by Michel Foucault: “power relations have an immediate hold upon it [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25). Texas is invested not only with institutional authority but also with a weapon that helps him enforce it. This situation of absolute power of the torturers, who are able to dispose of their prisoners' lives, is a leitmotiv throughout the film. As one of the jailers puts it: “Acá somos Dios”. In addition, this sequence thematizes the conflation between the purposeful infliction of pain and sexual control, which will be further discussed later. [1] All torturers are men and both Texas and Félix try to use their position to obtain María's sexual favors. The gun in Texas' hand could be interpreted as a phallic symbol, an extension of his physical but possibly also sexual dominance.

In this sequence, the division between the inside of the improvised concentration camp and the outside of the city of Buenos Aires is sharply presented. The contrast between both spaces is constant throughout the movie and is established by the use of lighting, among other technical devices. The interior of the garage is always dimly lit, with long shadows and an abundance of somber tones juxtaposed to ochre, dark blue and dark red. The city, on the other hand, is presented as bright and colorful, as exemplified by the strong luminosity coming from the outside through the open door. The sun almost always shines and at night the intensity of the lights is emphasized. The significance of these differences goes beyond

the obvious distinction between the gloom of prison and the pleasures of freedom, as director Marco Bechis points out:

Nelle scene sotteranee la camera era sempre in spalla, la luce era semplicemente la lampadina che si vede nell'inquadratura, non c'è stata alcuna luce aggiunta. [...] Fuori, alla superficie, la città è stata invece raccontata come fiction, con luce artificiale, carrelli, che in questo dispositivo funzionavano come finzione: quella in cui vivevano gli abitanti. Soto c'era la realtà" (25).

The *locus* of torture is filmed with natural lights while artificial illumination is added to the city scenes. This contributes to the feeling of unreality attached to the images of the world outside the garage. The physical and psychological pain of the tortured is presented as more genuine than the rest of Buenos Aires.

In *The Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry defines torture as an act that unmakes the foundations of the world. The purposeful infliction of physical pain destroys our most basic assumptions and deconstructs reality. Idelber Avelar, however, criticizes this clear division between barbarity and social order as an illusion. [2] He argues that atrocity and civilization are closely bound since practices such as torture can only exist with the implicit connivance of the society (260). In this scene of *Garaje Olimpo*, the open door functions as a threshold between two worlds and symbolizes their interrelation. The street seen through the door, with its quiet harmony, is oblivious to the suffering of the prisoners. The dreamlike quality of the images of Buenos Aires points to the fact that its serenity is an illusion. The whole city, the film seems to imply, is responsible for the acts of torture happening in its midst.

If the film addresses the inactivity of Argentineans in the face of torture, it equally questions the comfortable passivity of viewers. When Texas is about to fire on María, there is a shot filmed directly from above, a technique often employed throughout the movie. Panoramic views of the city, certain streets or the interior of prison cells are frequently presented from a higher angle. It seems as though spectators were being metaphorically invited to assume the role of gods, looking at the action from a higher level and judging what they see. The audience is being intimated to take a stance, to appraise not only the action but also the film itself and what it represents. However, the challenge to assess *Garaje Olimpo* proves to be a

difficult one to meet. Veracity, a central category in narrative accounts on torture such as testimonies, is not a relevant tool to comment on fictional and artistic productions. Also, as we shall see, traditional aesthetic categories such as harmony or beauty do not seem to be appropriate to the analysis of the film. The concept of the sublime might be employed here as an alternative to the concept of beauty in dealing with the fictional representation of violence and pain.

In On Beauty and Being Just Elaine Scarry argues that beautiful objects, beings or artistic creations incite replication. We tend to wish to recreate beauty or, as Scarry puts it: “Beauty brings copies of itself into being” (3). A brief reflection on the use of this category applied to a movie such as Garaje Olimpo is enough to realize its inadequacy. The horrific, painful moments portrayed in the film probably do not elicit in most viewers the desire to duplicate them, be it in reality or in art. In fact, our aesthetic response to the film is much closer to the notion of the sublime, as it was established by philosophy in the 18th century.

In his Critique of Judgment (1790) Immanuel Kant defines some of the differences between the idea of beauty and that of the sublime:

[Beauty] carries with it the feeling of life being furthered, and hence is compatible with charms and an imagination at play. But the other liking (the feeling of the sublime) is a pleasure that arises only indirectly [...]. Hence, too, this liking [the sublime] is incompatible with charms, and, since the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure. (98)

Unlike beauty, the sublime is not compatible with play and charms. It is “violent to our imagination” and arises from chaos, violence and devastation in nature (99-100).

Agreeableness is the feeling elicited by beauty, while the sublime produces a strong outpour of emotion (72). Its attraction is closely bound with repulse and the pleasure that results from it is a negative one in that it relates to pain. Kant depicts a person contemplating the sublime as someone “seized by an amazement bordering on terror, by horror and a sacred thrill” (129). Even though Kant associates the sublime primarily with the contemplation of

nature, he does not exclude its pertinence to the realm of artistic endeavor. In fact, throughout the 18th century, the term had been commonly used to describe art, especially literature. The notion was particularly relevant in the discussion of what Samuel Monk designates as the “graveyard school” (54). In his seminal work on the sublime, this critic documents the increasing popularity in the 18th century of texts in which fear and terror played a central role. He points out that there was a connection between graveyard poetry and a desire to attain the sublime (87). [3] Later, this aesthetics was extended to prose writing, chiefly with the gothic novel, and, in the 20th century, in film, with the emergence of horror movies. The sublime became a common concept in the study of both genres (see Mishra, 1994).

Marco Bechis’ movie can be seen as an example of an aesthetic of horror. The somber atmosphere of the indoor shots, the uncertainty that runs through the movie and the scenes of torture and other physical and psychological abuse resulting in the constant terror felt by the prisoners combine to create a mood of fright that permeates the work. [4] The category of the sublime, with its emphasis on strong emotion, fear and even terror is thus particularly apt to describe the film. However, this concept is equally useful in the analysis of this motion picture from another point of view, namely from an ethical perspective.

Unlike what usually happens in gothic novels, horror films and many other artworks associated with an aesthetic of horror, a patent moral stance underlies Bechis’ movie. Garaje Olimpo is not only a film about torture but also a film *against* torture. It is clearly a denunciation of the physical and psychological violence inflicted on political prisoners. [5] The ethical responsibility of both the filmmaker and the spectators is heightened by the fact that, although the events narrated are fictional, they are based on the reality of Argentina during the 1970s and 80s. [6] This is emphasized in the end of the film by a short note shown before the credits and stating that, during the dictatorship in the country, thousands of citizens were thrown alive into the sea. The military responsible for these crimes, the text points out, still have not been brought to justice. The movie openly intends to arouse not only an aesthetical but also an ethical response in viewers and to encourage them to assume a critical position regarding the actions it narrates.

The sublimity of horror has a long tradition of being associated with the liminal situation between aesthetics and ethics we find at Garaje Olimpo. Samuel Monk states that the feeling of terror was originally derived from religion. The terror produced by nature or artworks was related to the idea of an angry God (52). Literature that exploited the sensation of fear often had a moralizing intention, since the terrible elements described helped to show the greatness of the Creator and the inscrutability of His ways. The sensation of the sublime provoked by horror was consequently a way to appreciate God's greatness. In Kant's Critique of Judgment the relationship between the sublimity of horror and morality is secularized since ethics, not theology, lies at the core of the philosopher's system of thought. Unlike beauty, the sublime is, according to Kant, a completely subjective experience. It is not a quality of a particular object or landscape but the effect that these provoke in men: "For the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublime a basis merely within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature" (Kant 100). When human beings are faced with certain stimuli they experience the sublime and are led to realize that there is a supersensible world beyond the natural phenomena that surround them. They understand that although they are immersed in physical realities their cognitive powers are superior to sensibility. They enter the realm of reason, which is the source of the moral law that governs them and their true calling. [7]

The Kantian sublime constitutes a transition between theoretical and practical reason, i.e. between physical realities and morality. It is through the feeling of fear and horror that the individual experiences sublimity and is able to associate aesthetics with ethics. [8] The emphasis in Kant's Critique on the interrelation between these two notions is pertinent for the understanding of Garaje Olimpo. The aesthetic of horror developed in the film and its portrait of cruelty produce in viewers a response very close to what Kant described as the sublime. It is due to the spectators' strong emotional reaction to the scenes of violence in the screen, to their "amazement bordering on terror" (Kant 129), that their ethical conscience is aroused. Their moral condemnation of purposefully induced physical pain is likely to have gained renewed force after watching this artistic depiction of torture.

Kant's aesthetic philosophy can be deployed in the interpretation of numerous contemporary art forms dealing with violence, such as Bechis' film. Yet the contrast

established in the philosopher's writings between the physical world and the rational realm seems very reductive, in that human beings are presented as divided into two distinct compartments mediated through aesthetics. Furthermore, he defines a rigid hierarchy of human faculties, where the sensorial ability constitutes the lowest form of knowledge and is opposed to moral consciousness, which is the domain of reason. Consequently, the body is seen as completely separated from ethics and even as impairing its activity. In the next section I will attempt to recuperate the body as a site both of aesthetic and ethical experience. In the case of artistic representations of physical pain the sublime can only be understood through its hypostasization in the human body.

The Body Sublime

One of the first scenes of Garaje Olimpo after María's imprisonment focuses on the effect of pain upon the body. During her initial ten-hour torture session through electric shocks she gets dangerously hurt and her torturer Víbora (Marcos Montes) hastens to call his supervisor Tigre (Enrique Piñeyro). He reanimates María with the use of a defibrillator and scolds Víbora for using too high a voltage. Their conversation shows the complete instrumentalization of the prisoners and the jailers' bureaucratic approach to their métier:

T: ¿Qué dice la tabla para 40 kilos?

V: Quince mil.

T: Quince mil. ¿Cuánto le diste?

V: No, estaba dándole bien... Yo... Bueno, si no hablaba...

T: La tabla está por algo allí. Bueno, ya está regular. Puedes seguir. No le des agua.

The callousness of this dialogue is emphasized by the background sound of light pop music playing in the radio outside the prison cell, supposedly to conceal the cries of the tortured. The sequence is filmed in one shot and the camera concentrates on María's body. She is filmed naked from her waist up, lying on her back on top of the torture table in the center of the frame from a slightly high angle. She has her arms tied above her head to the top of the bench and her position evokes Christ in the cross. Víbora is at her left and Tigre occupies her right side but their faces are almost always outside the frame, since the camera rarely

moves from the girl's body. She has obviously been under intense physical pain and her skin shines with sweat. Her appearance is of utter defenselessness.

As it is mentioned in the dialogue between Víbora and Tigre, the immediate justification for inflicting pain is the desire to get information from the prisoners. Thus the torturer increased the voltage of the electric current applied to the girl's body because she would not speak. However, as Page DuBois points out, the practice of torture is not a reliable source of knowledge. The suffering of prisoners is rather seen as a punishment for certain actions (148) and the abuse of the body becomes an end in itself and not simply a means to gather data. [9] DuBois sees in the purposeful infliction of pain the wish to extract from the body of the other a truth that it conceals and which cannot be reduced to relevant information on political activities. For the torturer, the victim represents a difference that needs to be eradicated:

But a hidden truth, one that eludes the subject, must be discovered, uncovered, unveiled, and can always be located in the dark, in the irrational, in the unknown, in the other. And that truth will continue to beckon the torturer, the sexual abuser, who will find in the other – slave, woman, revolutionary – silent or not, secret or not, the receding phantasm of a truth that must be hunted down, extracted, torn out in torture. (147)

DuBois delineates a correlation between torture and sexual abuse, since the body of women has traditional been regarded by a phallogocentric society as the *locus* of absolute otherness. The domination of the other through torture evokes the power relations resulting from sexual difference. We can find this association in the scene of Garaje Olimpo described above, where María's naked helpless body is surrounded by the two men. The film enacts women's subjection and seems to ascribe María the traditional female role of a victim in a masculine universe. However, we can also interpret this scene as a subtle critique of the victimization of women and of the exploitation of their bodies.

Throughout Garaje Olimpo there is an emphasis on the representation of torture, of which the scene described above is only an example. The suffering body plays a significant role in the creation of an aesthetic of horror in the film. The viewers' reaction to this artistic

representation of pain is, to a certain extent, a physical one. Nervousness, tension and even the irresistible wish to cover one's eyes in order to escape the most brutal moments are likely to be some of the most common effects of the scenes of violence. The Kantian division between body and reason proves unable to explain the spectators' physical response to the movie. In this case, the feeling of sublimity cannot be conceived solely as an intellectual answer to outside stimuli.

In his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful Edmund Burke attempts to elucidate the physiological origins of the feeling of the sublime. For the philosopher, the foundation of sublimity was pain, while pleasure was the basis of beauty. His definition of the sensation is as follows:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of *pain*, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, [...] is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion because I am satisfied the ideas of *pain* are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the *body* and mind, than any pleasures [...]. (39) [my emphasis]

Burke attempts to give a physical explanation of how ideas of pain affect both the body and the mind and produce the feeling of the sublime. The philosopher emphasizes here the interrelation between physical and psychological processes when dealing with aesthetic concepts. For Burke, pain and fear — the idea of pain — affect the body in similar ways. Both the sensation and the emotion lead to a contraction of the muscles and cause tension in the nerves. Thus the effect that pain operates in the mind through the body is similar to the results of the idea of pain in the body (see Monk 97). The feeling of the sublime, resulting from terror, is therefore a tension of the subject. The philosopher goes on to explain how human beings can transform terror in an aesthetic experience. Just as labor is essential for the constitution, the contraction of the body through the feeling of the sublime is also beneficial: “As common labor, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a mode of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system” (Burke 136). Humans can appreciate the idea of pain and fear, provided that it does not endanger them. The sensation

of the sublime resulting from an aesthetic of horror is thus highly dependent on physical processes.

Although Burke's physiological description of the sublime seems nowadays irretrievably archaic, his efforts in bringing the whole organism into the artistic experience are still pertinent. His lessons are particularly relevant in the analysis of artworks that depict violence and torture, such as Bechis' film. The origin of the tension we experience when watching the movie is perhaps not so far removed from the "idea of pain" described by Burke (39). The repulse viewers feel in beholding the infliction of physical pain is probably due to their imagining that suffering in their *own* bodies. Kant's notion that the sublime resulting from the horrible may elicit a moral reaction explains the film only partially. It is the beholding of the physical suffering and the refraction of that pain in the audience that conditions our aesthetical appreciation of the film and allows for a possible ethical reaction. Ethics is thus a not only an intellectual but also a physical response of the beholders of torture scenes. In Garaje Olimpo sublimity cannot be dissociated from the bodies of the victims portrayed in the screen and from those of the spectators watching in horror.

Notes

[1] In the film El Caso Pinochet (2001) directed by Patricio Guzmán there is a similar association between the practice of torture and women. The movie presents the testimony of Chileans who suffered torture while narrating the legal process against former dictator Augusto Pinochet. Of the several people interviewed only one is a man. Women are thus ascribed to their traditional role of passive victims.

[2] In Torture and Truth Page DuBois makes a similar argument by showing how the values of civilization are bound with violence. She emphasizes the interrelation between torture and truth in Ancient Greece and describes the fact that in the Greek legal system, the torture of slaves was seen as a guarantor of the truthfulness of their testimony. She equally points out that, during a certain period, torture was used as a way to define social status. Thus the

Greek citizen was, by definition, someone who could not be submitted to the practice. Therefore, the social order was constituted through the infliction of pain.

[3] Monk points out that the concept of the sublime grew increasingly estranged from that of neo-classical beauty. In fact, it came to represent a set of qualities that neo-classical aesthetics had rejected: “Error is the first of several qualities that, finding no very happy home in the well-planned, orderly, and carefully trimmed domain of neo-classicism, sought and found refuge in the sublime, which constantly gathered to itself ideas and emotions that were to be prominent in the poetry and prose of the romantic era” (52).

[4] Marco Bechis states that the actors did not have access to the whole script before the end of the film. They received new instructions while the shooting progressed. This may have contributed to the mood of uncertainty in the film since the performers did not know what would become of the character they were interpreting (100).

[5] The views of the filmmaker became clear in the way the main characters are portrayed. The torturers are not only unnecessarily brutal but they are also petty thieves, like Félix, or crooks and murders, like Texas. The victims, on the other hand, are brave and noble, like Nene or María, who worked in a destitute neighborhood alphabetizing the poor.

[6] The filmmaker interviewed several former prisoners and victims of torture in preparation for the film. Also, he had himself been arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp called “Club Atlético” while he was visiting Argentina in 1977. Due to the influence of his family, the military transferred him to a civilian prison, where he met a man who had spent a year in “Garaje Olimpo” (Bechis 204-7).

[7] Kant’s own words are the following: “Hence the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation. [...] this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility. [...] For it is a law (of reason) for us, and part of our vocation, to estimate any sense object in nature that is too large for us as being small when

compared with ideas of reason; and whatever arouses in us the feeling of this supersensible vocation is in harmony with that law” (114-5).

[8] Significantly, there are pre-requisites for experiencing the sublime. While beauty is universally accessible to all human beings, one needs to be prepared to feel sublimity: “In fact, what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas. In all the evidence of nature’s destructive force, and in the large scale of its might, in contrast to which his own is nonexistent, he will see only the hardship, danger and misery that would confront anyone forced to live in such a place” (Kant 124). The transition from aesthetics to ethics can consequently only be undertaken by those who are already predisposed for it.

[9] Michel Foucault had already made a similar argument in Discipline and Punish. The work documents the transition from corporeal punishment to other forms of criminal justice in the last 200 years. Foucault mentions that in the Early Modern Age torture was commonly inflicted not so much to find out the truth about a certain crime but as a legal form of chastisement (16). The change to more humane sentences marks a transformation of paradigm in western legal systems. The decline of what Foucault names the “hold on the body” goes hand in hand with the end of punishment as a spectacle: “At the beginning of the nineteenth century, then, the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; [...] the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment” (14). The use of torture in contemporary societies is thus often perceived as an anachronism, a barbaric practice from another age and is hidden from public view. This can be observed in Garaje Olimpo. The scene described above happened underground, in a dark, closed space below the streets of Buenos Aires.

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