

## **Violence and the Sublime in Mass Media**

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### Aesthetics as Ethics

The proliferation of violence in the media is a symptom of the cultural fascination with dismemberment and fragmentation of the body and blood. But this fascination must stem from some inner drive, which was dormant, or repressed, until the 1990's. There is no denying that virtual violence had its attractions to certain groups of people in prior times, but until now the fascination was either limited to small communities (e.g. the military, adolescent boys, executioners, and individuals fascinated with power) instead of the prevalent attraction that it now appears to hold. The aesthetic of the superficial, which postmodernism claims, leaves room for a deeper ethical condition. The sublime offers this profound, traumatic kernel of humanity that the postmodern aesthetic lacks. The glimpse of our humanity as shown through the sublime experience provides an answer as to why we have this cultural blood lust.

Postmodern culture embodies a "will to experience," and these experiences are felt in the body. Among the popular topics of contemporary discourse are those relating to identity and the body. Until recently, identity was concretely attached to our immutable corporeal being. But now the body is adaptable; plastic surgery and the promise of genetic manipulation have the potential to transform our "shells" into whoever we want to be. We are now capable of designing our own bodies as well as our lives and deaths. As a complement to the unstable status of our-"selves," the remaining fixed element of being is confirmed through the sublime experience. The sublime is a feeling dependent on, and a reminder of, the physicality of the body.

There is no postmodern sublime without first the modern. Even the modernist First Name Burke recognized that there is nothing sublime which is not some manifestation of power. His notion of "power" emanated from an external force, as do most aesthetic experiences; but the manifestation of power we experience in the sublime comes from an internal force. What this internal force boils down to is the power of the body. We are the power; experience and Being now possess the power, in place of the external sublime Thing.

Immanuel Kant mentioned the sentiments of "physical inferiority" and "intellectual superiority" which were partly responsible for the sublime; but we know now that the intellect resides in the body (given the theoretical refutation of the Cartesian mind/body duality) and the mind resides in the body as well. Both of these Kantian sentiments are now physical: in the postmodern this becomes a physical inferiority and superiority in one sublime paradox. The true reason why the sublime can no longer be an aesthetic issue is that it reveals a deep truth about humanity: something which can no longer remain in the realm of aesthetics, how we look at things.

## Sex and Death Experiences

Along with the "will to experience" inevitably comes the will to experience death. And death is most recognizable in contrast to its antithesis: sex. The real-life confrontation between these apparent opposites takes place in the S/M act. It is the enjoyment of pain: a uniquely human property and one that is quintessentially sublime. This act is dependent on imagination. The sublime is pure imagination.

We cannot have a glimpse of death through the violent act without our being made of the same "stuff" (flesh and blood) as the victims. The contemporary confusion of boundaries, established by Seltzer, Deleuze and Baudrillard, between private and public, self and other, allows our identification with the bodies -real flesh and blood- that are depicted on the screen.

The violent imagery that permeates our screens expresses the event of the body through violence, through the body torn apart. During the moment of penetration of a bullet, or cleaving of a limb (as seen in your local theater) we ask, "Is it happening?" The feeling of displacement in the face of violence is sublime. Don't we want to live this sublime moment over and over again? This repetition is precisely what modern technology and media representation lets us do.

Mass media example as demonstrated by recent movies betrays how culture now enjoys violence and craves for the sublime experience: "The English Patient" shows that violence is not just for the horror film genre anymore. In "Crash" we are offered the proposition that we can design our own deaths in our fantasies, even if we cannot make that real choice when the event happens. And the sublime penetrating moment is depicted over and over again. In "Seven", the descriptions of the murdered bodies, and the resulting images in our imaginations, are the sublime, illustrating that pure imagination is the sublime. "Pulp Fiction" is an identity game which, in every scene, puts us in the shoes of the person whose body is torn apart. The tension and release that this creates is the collision of pleasure and pain, of desire (or painful yearning) and resolution (satisfaction). "Natural Born Killers" illustrates that as "gods of our worlds" we can achieve freedom through the fantasy of violence, and death. And the video games such as "Doom" extend the boundaries of violence to its limit; but the sublime moment occurs despite it. These games are closely related to the films of John Woo which depict violence as dance-like. The speed and ethereal quality of the body produce the sublime feeling.

The presentation of "Being" which the sublime summons forth, is inseparably linked with nothingness; the absence of being; in other words: death. The juxtaposition of death and life in one moment presents us with undeniable evidence of our humanity. "We are the beings for whom Being can be an issue."(Martin Heidegger) Having this presented to us in one brief moment, especially when it is least expected, gives us evidence of the fact that we are alive. But the pure imagination of the sublime resides in the body: the sublime body.

## Artificial Life

The lived experience of the sublime is an ethical issue. It would not exist human beings without our physical presence. In other words, because the sublime in the postmodern world is an occurrence which happens to us as corporeal beings, our bodies are intrinsic to the phenomenon.

The re-evaluation of violence and dismemberment in mass culture representations results in the media philosophy of the body as an "in-between." If the body is thought of as a material force of communication<sup>1</sup> instead of the place where humans perceive communication,<sup>2</sup> then a change will occur in our identities and in the discourse about images of the body. The embodiment of our identities, as well as our means of interaction and perception, are all dependent on the physicality of the body. Even in cyberspace, virtual pleasures will never replace the real pleasures that humans feel. Virtual sex and cyborg sex may hold the promise of gratification, but they will always be different than the pleasures we know now.

In contemporary society, the body is our only means of having a more fulfilled life, an embodied art of living or an "artificial life," as Wolfgang Schirmacher forcefully pointed out<sup>3</sup>. Allucquere Rosanne Stone poses the question, "What is the relationship of the body to self awareness?"<sup>4</sup> She calls this period in history "virtual" and points out the emergence of "...the gradual change that has come over the relationship between sense of self and the body, and the relationship between individual and group. I characterize this relationship as virtual because the accustomed grounding of social interaction in the physical facility of human bodies is changing."<sup>5</sup> For Stone, the responsibility for this change falls into the hands of technology, mostly concerning human/computer interaction.

## The Body Sphere

Regis Debray presents us with his intriguing concept of "mediology". Mediology is the "mediations, [the system] through which an idea or visual representation becomes a material force." Debray explains this "how we look" as "the invisible codes of the visible"<sup>6</sup> I propose that through the sublime, the body, or representations therewith, becomes a material force. Mediology is the way we look, which, in turn gives an image its power. The ideologies and predispositions of culture, through which we perceive the body, gives the body its power -- its "iconic efficacy"<sup>7</sup>

In Table 1, Debray organizes media production into three different "spheres" which are somewhat historical, but mostly ontological. Using his principles of categorization, I have developed a fourth sphere: The Body Sphere, (column 4) in hopes that the sublime body, if un-definable, can be described through its symptoms. The "iconic efficacy" of a created image is transformed into a happening efficacy for the living person. And in the "Regime of the Event," the sublime body is recognizable.

Like the other spheres, the Body Sphere presupposes the disappearance of a method of communication (i.e. writing, printing, the audiovisual.) The disappearing mode is "expectations." Since the Body Sphere is not a particular time period where mass media

production occurs, but a lived mode of communication, which does take place during a particular time, the method of communication emerges from the individual, and not from a tradition. Expectations are the boundaries which prevent free invention and reinvention of perception. "The reality of the body is the realization of phenomena in the body."<sup>8</sup>

The power of the body that the sublime requires is not manifested in the flesh and blood of the individuals who have the sublime experience. But this power is dependent upon the idea and projection of our own bodies onto ourselves. One way of describing the sublime body is through individuals with "abnormal" conceptions about their existing bodies. In the most extreme and obvious case, the anorexic has a certain idea of what her body looks like. The reality of what her body actually looks like is still much different than the body that observers project upon her. But the idea that she has of her own body (which is only a figment of her imagination) could be construed as the sublime body. Similarly, we all have images of what our bodies appear to be. These constructed ideas usually have nothing to do with what our bodies actually are -- materially. How our own physicality feels to us, as we embody it, is always a much different construction from reality. This "projected" body, the one we imagine ourselves to have, occurs in the imagination. It is this imagined entity, like the sublime, in which we feel the sensations of the outside world. The anorexic feels her pain as if she were obese, not as if she were a skeleton. The itch on my left arm is the focus of my whole being, until I scratch it. The pleasure of sex or fine fabric or a massage has the scale of pleasure which I feel built into it by my projected image of myself, in space. The "projected body" is one aspect of the sublime body.

### The In-Between Body

We can easily change the materials of our bodies, but the immateriality of the in-between body is a nomadic body which focuses and un-focused depending on the stimulus. "With the television image -- the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era -- our body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen."<sup>9</sup> And when we understand the force of communication that our bodies are, it is done without expectations of what we "should" do with it.

With a touch of postmodern irony, the avantgarde Critical Art Ensemble adapts the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas: "There are two kinds of contact, that of surface, and that of power. By the former a body can be touched only by a body; by the latter a body can be touched by an incorporeal reality, which moves that body."<sup>10</sup> With the first kind of contact referred to, we are immediately indicated towards the material body. But the contact of "power" is the sublime body, where the "incorporeal reality" is a great power manifested in us, which we become aware of. It is through the power of reception, rather than the ability of perception, that the intangible "fold" of the sublime body incarnates; in the folds of Gilles Deleuze's "soul" body and his "material" body is the sublime body. "It is not the body that realizes, but it is in the body that something is realized, through which the body itself becomes real and substantial."<sup>11</sup>

So this in-between body, this sublime body is the most fundamental body that we have. It determines how we act, move, dress, and our attitudes towards the outside world. This is the location where we feel everything including the sublime.

### Transhuman Cyborgs

The realization of the sublime body can only occur with the budding abilities of technology to make us trans-human. In the last chapter of "The War Between Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age", Stone defines cyborgs in her anecdotal style. "Cyborgs are boundary creatures, not only human/machine, but creatures of cultural interstice as well...."<sup>12</sup> It is this in-between of the cyborg that makes it the patron saint of the sublime body. But the current understandings of the cyborg make this problematic.

The concept of the cyborg embodies both freedom and violence. Scott Bukatman discusses the packaging of the cybernetic superhero in his essay, "X-Bodies: (the torment of the mutant superhero)." This hero, "...is massively muscled, locked into 'dynamic,' heroic pose."<sup>13</sup> Bukatman suggests that the power of this figure is in the threat of his stature, not in his actions; his cyborg is merely the personification of adolescent male delusions of grandeur. His is a limited interpretation. The resonance of the cyborg fantasy, with its capacity for various interpretations, leaves room for more all-encompassing views.

In "Simians, Cyborgs and Women" Donna Haraway's approaches contemporary discourse about the body from a feminist perspective. She describes the current cultural, social, and political states of mind as animating a "border war" between organism and machine. "The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination."<sup>14</sup> She advocates, "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction."<sup>15</sup> Haraway is largely concerned with un-defining gender -- that is, arriving at a genderless body through the cyborg. For her, the cyborg is outside the perimeters of reproduction and the border wars thereof. She envisions a cultural renaissance where gender, and the issues surrounding it, had never existed. Haraway's cyborg is a celebration of the power of the body.

Arthur Kroker views the cyborg as a violent being based on fear of losing the material body. He cites the current trends toward self mutilation (piercing, tattoos, slash and burn) as an effort to regain control over the lost flesh that the electronic age has taken from us. He says this cyborg is a symptom of "the age of the disappearing body."<sup>16</sup> In Kroker's "The Possessed Individual", he describes "The Postmodern Body as a War Machine"<sup>17</sup> and suggests, "The violence of the war machine only confirms the disappearance of war into a perfect simulation."<sup>18</sup>

### Toward a Sublime Body

What do the mediated images of the body signify? In my evaluation, the violence in contemporary film only confirms the disappearance of the body into a perfect simulation. It could alternatively confirm the disappearance of the body in "real life" (this is not my view),

but the repeated blood-soaked simulations express something wholly different. Through the reinvented cyborg, which in-itself reinvents the body, there is a being which inhabits the material form of the sublime body. The description of the reinvention of the cybernetic human provides a starting point for the development of the sublime body.

Perhaps the true access to the sublime and the realization of living this artificial life is through discomfort, where the simultaneous denial and undeniability of the body provide agitation. The coeval existence of the inside and the outside of the body, and this realization which discomfort enables, provides the simultaneous absence and presence of our physicality which the sublime body requires.

1 Regis Debray, "The Three Ages of Looking," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 529.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962) 72.

3 Wolfgang Schirmacher, "Homo Generator: Media and Postmodern Technology," *Culture on the Brink*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994) 68.

4 Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War Between Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) 16.

5 Stone, 17.

6 Debray, 532.

7 Debray, 532.

8 Deleuze, 120.

9 Baudrillard, 127.

10 Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994) 8.

11 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 105.

12 Stone, 178.

13 Scott Bukatman, "X- Bodies: (the torment of the mutant superhero)" *Uncontrollable Bodies*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994) 106.

14 Donna Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 150.

15 Haraway, 151.

16 Kroker, 54.

17 Kroker, 22.

18 Kroker, 38.