

The responsibility of watching.

Lillian Ferrari<sup>1</sup>

*Shema*

*You who live secure*

*In your warm houses*

*Who return at evening to find*

*Hot food and friendly faces:*

*Consider whether this is a man...*

Primo Levi

While we were preparing the paper for the Convergencia meeting, I came across an opinion article in the New York Times about the racially profiled killing of Tyre Nichols on the hands of the police and its highly circulated video in social media, which I thought was very interesting and worthy of further reflection from the point of view of the ethics of psychoanalysis. The title of the article itself, “The responsibility of watching”<sup>2</sup> was already suggestive and full of resonances for our practice.

The video shows a group of police officers viciously beating and abusing a helpless African-American civilian, shouting and screaming contradictory orders that were impossible to comply with, showing a display of fake ‘police bravado’ that represents a mockery and a perversion of

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<sup>1</sup> Presented in Après-Coup Round Table Psychoanalysis: Ethic and Practice, Today. September 30, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The Responsibility of watching. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/28/arts/television/body-cam-video-tyre-nichols-watch.html?smid=url-share>

the law, in which we get a glimpse of a sadistic, obscene jouissance being depicted before our eyes.

Indeed, given the perverse content of the video, and its display of sadism and violence, what is the fine line that needs to be drawn between being a witness and being a spectator? How to draw a frontier between our ethical duty to witness and to testify against violence and brutality of any sort -in fact the video was instrumental in the indictment of the police officers- and the fact that, the mere act of watching these images involved us as taking part in the position of the anonymous audience who is potentially enjoying a piece of voyeuristic fantasy?

No doubt these are pressing questions in lieu of the dominance in today's 'society of the spectacle' of our aspiration towards full visibility and total transparency, an aspiration that can hardly betray its superegoic aspect. To 'show and reveal everything could summarize today's injunction, with the additive that the more developed and refined our 'vision' has become through the use of sophisticated cameras and technology, the more difficult is to veil the presence of a ubiquitous gaze from which we are being observed and surveyed. A real civilization of the gaze is underway, as Gerard Wajzman called it, and I just refer you to his wonderful book "L'oeil absolu."<sup>3</sup>

To move further with the interrogation on the difference between witnessing and the position of spectator -where the jouissance of the gaze and the fantasy is potentially involved-, perhaps is useful to consider Lacan's remarks on the issue of 'modesty' (*pudeur* in French) throughout

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<sup>3</sup> Wajzman, Gérard. *L'oeil absolu*. Éditions Denoël. 2010.

his teaching, and it's terminological nuances with shame (*honte* in French). Indeed, modesty seems to refer to something structural in connection with the constitution of the subject, the manifestation of an effect that belongs to the very fabric of the subject insofar as the subject depends on language and it's immersion in the social link. One of the first places Lacan mentions modesty is in the paper *The signification of the phallus*<sup>4</sup>, where he defines the phallus as signifier 'that designates meaning effects,' but on condition of instituting a bar in everything that it signifies, revoking any kind of naturally attached essence to the thing that it signifies and basically introducing castration as a result of the phallic signifier. Modesty is correlative to the act of barring that causes the subject's division: it veils it, but it also indicates it. Thus, the phallus introduces castration and the subsequent function of the veil as the place where absence is projected, and where desire and lack are safe guarded. It is in this context that Lacan mentions the function of the Demon of **Aidos**, the goddess of modesty in Greek mythology depicted in the Villa of the Mysteries, using the Greek etymology for the French term *pudeur* that refers to *aidora*, the genitals, which has its Latin counterpart in 'pudenda', which refers to the private parts. Thus, the Phallus is the signifier connected to becoming human, linking the signifier and the body, mortifying it as an effect of language, and instituting the very core of the subject as lacking, as want to be (*manque-à-etre*,). Indeed, one of the images of the frescoes shows a woman being flagellated by the goddess at the moment when the veil covering the phallus is about to be lifted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *The Signification of the Phallus* in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink. The First Complete Edition in English. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY. 2006

<sup>5</sup> Benvenuto, Bice. *Concerning the Rites of Psychoanalysis: Or the Villa of the Mysteries*. Routledge, 1994

Modesty (pudeur) seems to be conceived by Lacan as slightly different from (honte) shame, which he considers more symptomatic. Indeed, in the Seminar *Desire and its Interpretation*, in the context of speaking about the formula of the fantasm, he remarks *“The correlation is such --* -he is talking about the correlation between the \$ and the *object a- that the object has the precise function of signifying the point at which the subject cannot name himself. It is in this respect that modesty [pudeur] is, I would say, the royal form of what shows up in symptoms in the guise of shame and disgust.”* (Sem 6, p. 413)

Basically, the phantasy provides a ‘designation’ for the subject at the precise moment which, the signifier that represents it also causes its ‘disappearance’. That is, given the fact that the signifier is incapable of providing an identity at the level of the subject’s being, at his core being of desire and jouissance--- *object a* in the fantasm comes to this place, to support it, providing a designation for that most intimate, unique yet unsayable part of the subject.

If shame is more symptomatic is because it is related to a drive satisfaction and its masturbatory effects in the fantasm in connection with the what the child perceives as linked with forbidden sources. We may recall what Freud says about the beating fantasy in children in his seminal text *“A Child is being Beaten”*: *“The analytic treatment of the topic is met by unmistakable resistance. Shame and a sense of guilt are perhaps more strongly excited in this connection.”*<sup>6</sup> Shame is precisely a defensive reaction against what the subject perceives as a

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<sup>6</sup> Freud, S. (1919) *“A Child is Being Beaten”*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. London: Hogarth Press. Volume XVII. 179

strong libidinal demand coming from an scopophilic source, a demand focused in the satisfaction of the gaze which is particularly accentuate it in the fantasm.

But we can also think about the sense of shame and resistance the Ratman experienced at the moment in which he needed to reproduce to Freud the tale of the torture with the rats that he had heard from the cruel Captain, a shame precisely on account of what Freud intuited was the Ratman's horror at his own pleasure, a pleasure of which he was unaware<sup>7</sup>.

We may say in this regard that the horror and the shame he experienced was related to his own 'extimate' jouissance, a jouissance that he felt and experienced as 'foreign'.

So modesty seems to constitute something fundamentally human, like a barrier that protects the most intimate and real core of the subject, and a protection against the obscene forms that the real may adopt. The forcing of this barrier amounts to an act of violence, as Lacan reminds us in his paper *Kant avec Sade*, where he underscores that the violation of modesty is a crucial aspect in the perverse Sadean experience.

In the text, Lacan characterizes modesty as 'amboceptor', as a link that connects the subject with its partner, in which the "immodesty of the one violates the other's modesty"<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, the perverse subject aims at provoking the subjective division in the other by way of causing its angst or exploiting the limits of pain in the victim, in order to bring forth the reduction of the subject to function of the remainder, the fallen and the abject object. The pervert aims at jouissance, seeking to violate the most intimate aspects of the other as a way to force the

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, S. "*Notes upon a case of Obsessional Neurosis*." (1909) Standard Edition. London: Hogarth Press. Volume X

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *Kant avec Sade* in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink. The First Complete Edition in English. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY. 2006

demise, the fall of the subject. This is the reason why in Sade's fantasy the victims are chosen among the most virtuous, innocent, beautiful, etc. in order to better emphasize the sense of assault and violation against those traits where a subject may place his own sense of dignity.

In the Sadean experience, says Lacan the subject "*proposes to monopolize a will after having already traversed it in order to instate itself at the inmost core of the subject, whom it provokes beyond that by offending his sense of modesty. For modesty is an amboceptor with respect to the circumstances of being: between the two, the one's immodesty by itself violating the other's modesty.*"<sup>9</sup>

Modesty in this sense evokes the place of threshold belonging to the subject in relation to the social link, a limit that points to the boundaries that constitutes us as human, and whose violation may lead to the worse, there where one cannot but wonder, paraphrasing Primo Levy, If this is man.

So, Going back to the initial question, what would constitute an 'ethical testimony', one that neither shocks nor hides, but that within some bounds of modesty succeeds nonetheless in transmitting something of that 'evil side' in human? And moreover, how does the issue of modesty pertain to the analytics practice and its transmission?

Two wonderful and ethical testimonies come to mind: one is *Shoa*, the film by Claude Lanzman, which intentionally refrains from the overt showing of horrific images of death and of corpses, but is rather an attempt to recreate absence and emptiness through long silenced shots, through documents and images of desolated and ruined landscapes left by the camps. It is

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, Jaques. *Kant avec Sade*. Op. Cit. 651

precisely thanks to this voided background that the off voices of the testimonials we hear resonate more strongly: it creates a greater echo for their hearing.

Second example is of course Primo Levy's masterful written testimonies about his experience in the camps, gathered in his trilogy "If this is Man".

Among the many remarkable qualities of his work —he was for sure, an extraordinary writer, poet and ethical thinker, someone who did not shy away from moral self-examination even within the most extreme circumstances—, I just want to mention his deliberate and sometimes agonizing preoccupation as a writer to produce a testimony that could be heard and listened to, that could be credible and remembered. In answering a question about the lack of hatred encountered in his testimonies, Primo Levy says he wanted to be 'as credible as possible': "For that same reason, to write this book I deliberately assumed the **measured** and **sober** language of the witness, not the lament of the victim or the anger of the avenger. I thought that my word would be more credible and more useful the more objective it appears, the less impassioned it sounded..." <sup>10</sup>(1976 Appendix to If this is Man).

Most of all, his testimony exhort us to hear, to listen, Shema in Hebrew, as the tittle of his famous poem says. An exhortation that is in close proximity with the ethics of the analyst.

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<sup>10</sup> Primo Levi, "Si esto es un hombre". Apéndice de 1976. Buenos Aires: Paidós. 2015. 193. (In English "The Complete Works by Primo Levi. Edited by Ann Goldstein. New York. Liveright Publishing Corporation.