

Our Need of Taboo: Pictures of Violence and Mourning Difficulties

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In memory of Lajos Szekely

Can everything be depicted? Where has the boundary been drawn for what is permissible? When is the description of reality no longer ethical? What inner need in man leads to his effort to go repeatedly beyond the boundaries of the permissible, to see all and show all? And what are the consequences for our psyche, for our inner life, of new technical approaches by which pictures of what is happening in various places in the world can be spread so rapidly, without regard to distance? Questions like this are being posed today not only by professional opinion-makers but also by the man in the street, who is confronted by pictures of violence, suffering, death and perversion even in the sanctity of his home. Psychoanalytical experience is not ineffectual in the face of these questions even if it can not offer firm backing for a pronouncement about how it really *is* today or how it *ought to be*. Our specific knowledge can help us to identify the *wishes and fantasies* in operation at times when we are fascinated by or feel loathing for various descriptions of violence, may they be fiction or an alleged description of what is happening here and now. These highly private wishes and fantasies are part of our universal dreams which recur in various disguises throughout the whole history of mankind.

Descriptions of violence are as old as man's ability to describe what is happening around and within himself, from cave paintings through Greek myths, Homer's epic, the Bible, to present-day news reports from Bosnia, violent films and pornography. In all probability the prohibition against describing certain facts is old as the capacity to do so. The prototype of this taboo was the prohibition against naming and describing the God of the Judaism. As with every prohibition, its origin is the antithesis – the cult of images, the idolatry. My working hypothesis is that *pictures of violence, like pictures of sexuality, are in our culture the objects of an ancient taboo*. Man's relation to his own ability to name and depict, to be his own witness, has always been ambiguous. The name and the image have taken on magical significance, and to name or depict has been a mystical way taking possession of "the reality". We can see clear traces of this in children's play – there is nothing inexplicable or traumatic in the child's world which the child does not attempt to master by reproducing the incident within the secure framework of play.

The demoralising influence of depiction on man has been discussed since antiquity and in Plato's ideal state all forms of mimetic art were to be forbidden. Regardless of the medium it uses or to whom it is addressed, art has always been an attempt to describe *man's relation to his taboo, to the boundaries he himself has staked out for himself*. At the same time art is a way to create, question, and break through another boundary, that between reality and fantasy, between the portrayal and what is portrayed. Today's debate about reports of

violence in the media once more raises the question of man's relation to the taboos he has created in his previous history. New techniques have given us opportunities for an instant global communication of messages. The medium has prevailed over the message (McLuhan 1964), creating an illusion that there is no intermediate link, as if the picture were no longer filtered through the psyche of others but could reach our inner selves directly: images claim to replace immediate perception. The images spread in this way *deny that the ancient taboos against depicting mankind's violence and sexuality exist at all* – or that there is an psychic agent for taboo.

TABOO AND VIOLATION

Taking obsessional neurosis as a model, Freud understands (1913; 1918) taboo as a conscious prohibition against the fulfilment of the most powerful unconscious desires and probably the earliest form of conscience. All taboos have archaic roots; they are external prohibitions against strongly desirable actions which were imposed on generations of primitive people. So man's thirst for blood and his appetite for murder have grown into a blood and murder taboo. Obedience to taboos is a parallel to the child's obedience to his father and the desire to rebel against him. We all have a strongly ambivalent attitude to taboos: we want nothing more than to break with them but are at the same time afraid of doing so.

In the story of the creation taboos do not have ethical roots; they are ontological. At the beginning a difference arose. Differentiation was the original act of creation. God separated day from night, heaven from earth, the creator from the creation. Only God knew the difference. In the beginning of man's history there was a breach of taboo. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge involved man's desire to see the difference himself and attack the distinction between God and man. History began with the punishment of crime. East of the Garden of Eden the next crime was committed, Abel's murder by his brother. In our imagination sexuality and the thirst for knowledge are linked to forbidden fruits. The same ambivalent relation, the same unconscious desire to violate the prohibition, lie at the bottom of science and perversion, man's creativity and criminality. Man has taken the liberty of putting the forbidden into ritualised forms, fenced in by strict rules like the totem meal, the ecstatic rituals of antiquity, the "bread and theatre" of the Roman Empire, the carnival world *rebours*.

The most important function of taboo is to provide frames, to draw a line. Every taboo establishes a boundary between the allowed and the forbidden, between God and man, between the sacred and the profane, between what may be touched and what may not be touched, between the living and the non-living, between generations, sexes, permitted and forbidden food. The taboo, the boundary, leaves room for the imagination, for fancies about being able to do the forbidden. The imagined violation is an important element in the satisfaction of every desire. The portrayal of the forbidden gives pleasure only if it stimulates the

imagination. Without imagination the picture is flat and mechanical. The account which leaves no room for fantasy dissolves the boundary around the fantasising, the day dream, the game, the theatre, which needs to be created in order to make it into "something else" than the world of everyday life. In the stories patients tell of their experiences of the first psychotic break-down, the same theme stubbornly recurs: having crossed a boundary. How does this boundary originate? And what happens when it is crossed?

A BOUNDARY, A FRAME, A SHIELD

The first boundary we confront is that between the ego and the non-ego. Man's spiritual dimension, our psyche, may be regarded as a product of a boundary, a separation. In the psychoanalytical tradition a number of concepts exist which describe the dividing line between the ego and stimuli coming from both outside and inside. According to Freud (1895b) trauma is a matter of large amounts of excitation breaking through the ego's protective barrier. He describes depression (1895a; 1917a) as an "open wound," a "hole in the psychic sphere," an "inner bleeding" which empties the ego. Inwardly, too, our psyche is structured by boundaries drawn between various instruments: the conscious, the pre-conscious and the unconscious, or the id, the ego and the superego. Freud (1920) compares the "protective shield against excitation" to a membrane or skin which takes on an inorganic character: because the outer layer has ceased to be living, it saves all the deeper layers from a similar fate. Anzieu (1985) has studied the psychic significance of the skin as a boundary and a shield for the ego, a unifying and protective "sack." He coined the concept "skin ego" whose function is to protect and contain unconscious psychic phenomena in a way similar to the way the skin protects and contains the body. From these reasoning we can say that *every act of violence, both psychic and physical, is directed against the ego's protective shield, the psychic skin, and concretely against the victim's skin and body orifices*. This thesis, which is linked to Freud's statement that the model for all taboos is the touching taboo, is also applicable to invasive accounts of violence and perversion.

Our relation to *our own ego and its boundaries* is of dubious character. On the one hand we strive to maintain the ego as an instrument of autonomy, an active agent in our own lives, a centre for autonomous and ethical action. On the other hand we all have a longing to transgress the ego's boundaries; these may be interpreted as an obstacle to another, freer existence, going beyond the ego. We can experience the ego's dissolution in sleep and in dreams, by using various types of stimuli, by going to the movies, enjoying nature or by having ecstatic religious or sexual experiences. A flight too far from the limits of one's own ego, as for example into the drug culture, may end in violence, murder, chaos, and the downfall of the individual.

One boundary is that *between fiction and reality*. This boundary is not determined once and for all. It changes with the development of the individual and the

culture. Often the boundary between fiction and reality is ritualised, even if the crossing, the threshold, seems to be invisible. The listeners gather around the bard and the tale can begin. "Let's play," say the children. The family gathers around the radio, the lights dim at the movies, the curtain goes up at the theatre. We open the book and can close it again. But we can never be sure. Of course, as children we could call out to the marionette "Look out!" when the enemy sneaked after our hero, even if on another level we knew that it was "only" a play at a puppet theatre. In certain primitive cultures there was a great fear of being photographed – the one who owned the picture had a magic power over the person pictured. When the Scudder missiles exploded over Israel in 1992 and were sent via TV directly into our living rooms, we needed to remind ourselves that it was neither fireworks nor an exciting film.

Defying this boundary between fiction and reality has always been the ambition of great art. Sometimes the need to draw attention to the fact that it is not a realistic picture of some kind of "reality" has gotten the upper hand, as in non-figurative art or the theatre of the absurd. Sometimes the dominating ambition has been quite the opposite: to go for an alleged "true reality," even "truer" than reality itself. Being at a rock concert or a boxing match, watching a pornographic film or a newsreel picture of children succumbing to thirst can give us the same feeling – it is actually happening, "in reality," here and now.

This boundary between fiction and reality, between "as-if" and "for real", between the portrayal and what is being portrayed, is constantly being influenced by new narrative techniques and new communication tools. The generation born before TV existed may be troubled by the fact that the difference between a news report and a horror film is wiped out as one flips channels. New electronic media, the stock example of which has become virtual reality, shifts anew the boundary between fiction and reality, between living and non-living. A four-year-old boy points at the TV screen and says, "That's make-believe, isn't it?" For him the question is as natural in front of the TV as on the nursery school playground when he wonders if an older playmate pushes him "for real" or as a part of the game. Never previously in the history of mankind, however, have we had the same chances in our everyday lives to be anywhere in the world as witnesses to the worst catastrophes, the most bestial murders, the most horrifying war scenes. This may be perceived as if not only our homes but our very egos were being invaded, and this starts up the ancient protective mechanism, our psychic defences. When the account of reality is unendurable we can make it "fictive" by regarding it as something which is happening "there" as "only" a picture or something which is not "here." Our children beg for confirmation, "They don't shoot like that in Sweden? Not in our city, anyway? Not on our street? Not at us?"

There is also a temptation to cross the boundary *between good and evil*. Our memories of endless debates on moral issues from our teen-age years, often with various borderline cases as examples, may be a reminder of this. In the

world of fiction Faust as well as heroes of *science fiction* personify our fascination with evil. We probably all bear within us a wish, a fantasy, of a life "beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche), beyond the boundaries of our existence, with access to unlimited power and secret forces. Recently it has been observed that it is not only film but also newly released books for young people which to a greater and greater extent deal with evil and death, without love, without anything good, without explanation. Symptomatically enough, in these publications there is a recurrence of the same remark the hero makes when caught in a vulnerable situation: "It was like a film." This fascination with evil and power is always linked to notions of boundary crossing, originally the wish to go beyond the child's helplessness and overstep the authority and prohibitions of parents. This is also linked to the desire for immortality and a life not governed by moral principles.

The outermost limit for us is that *between living and dead, between human and non-human*. Perhaps every use of violence implies that the other person is dehumanised, robbed of his human dignity, regarded not as a living and feeling subject but as an object of our lust and hate. There is a hairline difference between two knights who are engaged in a life and death struggle, but who at the same time recognise each others' sovereignty, and the undefeated hero battling evil embodied in a human figure. The systematic annihilation of Jews presupposed that they had first been declared and been regarded as non-human, vermin and contagion to be eradicated – we still speak of "the extermination" of the Jews.

The boundaries between fiction and reality, between good and evil and between living and dead are closely interwoven. When one is eliminated the other follows along. The longing to cross the boundaries of one's own ego is also bound up with *the desire to see all and show all*. It soon turns out that *all* of this deals with one aspect – a taboo-shrouded aspect – at the expense of the connected whole we do not want to see or show. This is the mechanism common to every boundary crossing – isolating a fragment of our emotional life and ignoring the connected whole. In this way the boundary which is to be crossed and eliminated is re-created. At this point we can already formulate a preliminary hypothesis, viz. that *descriptions of violence and perversion may lead to traumatising intrapsychic consequences if they penetrate the skin ego or contribute to its dissolution*. A condition for the psychological working through of our experiences and conflicts is, on the contrary, the maintenance of boundaries. In the psychoanalytical treatment situation the purpose of the frames is to protect both the analyst and the analysand from the destructiveness them both. Certain actions are taboo and under that mantle everything can be expressed and named.

THE PERVERSE UNIVERSE

The desires and fantasies played back in the media today in the pictures of violence are among the perverse components in each and every one of us but

they are also a depiction of the perverse aspects of our social life. In the perverse universe there is no difference between "as if" and "make-believe" and "for real," between fantasy and deed, between our inner, psychic reality and the outside world. Everything is "for fun" at the same time that it is happening in reality. "Beyond good and evil," the dividing line between living, human, and dead, non-human is erased. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984; 1986; 1989) calls attention to the fact that the perverse scenario is apt to be revived in a group context where the differences between individuals are levelled out. According to her the distinguishing characteristic of perversion is that differences between sexes and between generations are erased. The differentiation which perversion attempts to obliterate revives, however, in the middle of the perverse scenario which perpetually revolves around power, control, and dominance or subjection. Man's hybris is in his longing to take the Creator's place. Chasseguet-Smirgel sees perversion as one of the ways to attempt to expand the boundaries of what is possible and be set free from reality. (Creativity is another way). The perverse temptation is to regard pregenital desires and satisfactions, accessible to the little girl or boy, as equal or better than the adult's genital desires and activities. The antithesis of the perverse universe is the three-dimensional Oedipal psyche: between mother and child there is the father/reality itself which sets up an incest barrier. Separation and differentiation are the cornerstones of the law.

VIOLENCE AND DESTRUCTIVENESS IN OUR INNER WORLD AND IN SOCIETY

The connection between our inner world and the society into which we are born and which we ourselves create is a dark chapter in psychoanalytical theory. Unless we approach this uncertain area, however, we can not answer the opening questions. In Freud's (1930) vision of man and society we find violence as the basis of our existence on two levels. Here I mean the violence in the uninhibited instinct and the violence which our culture practices against the individual. Without a certain measure of compulsion and restraint in the gratification of impulses, cultural institutions can not be maintained, Freud says (1927, p. 7): "One has, I think, to reckon with the fact that there are present in all men destructive, and therefore anti-social and anti-cultural, trends and that in a great number of people these are strong enough to determinate their behaviour in human society." Social violence is represented within us as the superego. The ego's function is to find compromises between the unbridled pressures of instinct, the outer world, and the restraints of the superego. (Freud 1933a.)

On the initiative of the League of Nations Albert Einstein turned to Freud in 1932 with the question, "Why war?". Freud (1933b) began his reply with a reminder that in antiquity violence was the traditional way to solve all conflicts and that the goal has always been to eliminate the adversary entirely. Throughout the development of civilisation the violence of the strong individual has been overcome by transferring power to a larger unit, consolidated by emotional ties between its members. Group solidarity can, however, lead to the disintegration of

ego boundaries when the individual joins a larger association to which he delegates his responsibility and his conscience. When the leader replaces the ego ideal of the individual, acts which were previously forbidden may appear to be permissible (Freud 1921). Man's aggressive and destructive urges may be integrated with the libido and work constructively, or be separated from it and given free rein. Despite Freud's celebrated scepticism, the exchange of letters with Einstein breathed life into the belief that everything which promotes civilisation and culture operates against war. The cornerstone of civilisation is the universal prohibition against incest (Freud 1913). Even here we return to the central role played by a boundary, a difference. Without distinctions between different psychic agents, without a boundary between our desires and our conscience, no compromises are possible.

Psychoanalytical experience teaches us that periods of vast revolutionary changes are followed by crises for the individual, albeit after a certain delay and after the acute phase has passed. Bychowski (1968) shows convincingly how anxiety and fear lead to hate within the individual and in the society – from antiquity to the present day. During certain historical epochs, when large groups of people have lost faith in the old solutions to their life problems, in religion and other ideologies, and when the superego has degenerated, a state of discontent, hopelessness and uncertainty arises. This releases a psychological regression which activates infantile reaction patterns and awakens a longing for a strong leader, a helping father. Starting from Caesar, Cromwell, Robespierre, Hitler and Stalin Bychowski shows how people who no longer believe in their own strength transfer all their hope to the leader who promises salvation and a new faith in the future. Following Freud's line he points out that man's wickedness, hate and destructiveness find their best outlet when they serve man's highest ideals. From another perspective Hanna Arendt (1970) observed a displacement of violence to the political arena after the time of the student revolt. According to her, loss of power brings with it a temptation to replace it with violence when violence is no longer supported and controlled by authority. On the psychological plane there is a parallel in the feeling of powerlessness which breeds rage and violence.

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Despite our humanistic ideals, love of our fellow man and concern for others, there are in us all more or less distinct traces of the desire to make others into non-us, and in the end into non-people. It is our own outraged narcissism which reduces others to a non-human status and underlies "the Fascist mentality" (Bollas 1992). Fear of the different, on the other side of our prescribed cairn, lays the foundation for xenophobia. Eissler (1975) gives the name "cultural narcissism" to that force which causes us to overvalue our own national, political or religious affiliation, leading to conflict and war. Green (1981) believes that every culture builds on inherent paranoid processes: the distinctive character of the culture is confirmed by the devaluation and rejection of another culture often lying near at hand. Minority groups which deviate from our own group in matters

of religion, ethnical origin, political views, language or sexuality are convenient projection screens for the intolerance of our own weakness and aggressivity. The path the projection takes often follows "the narcissism of small differences" (Freud 1918; 1921; 1930): the closest neighbour is perceived as a threat to our own identity and survival and the neighbour farther away seems to be nicer and more exciting. We meet "strangers" on visits home. In Sweden we tell Norwegian stories but not English or Russian stories. Yet as a matter of fact we do not eat up our neighbours, we do not make lamp shades out of their skin and mattresses out of their hair. Though all that has happened. Cannibalism, child murder and human sacrifice are part of our prehistoric roots.

The culture we live and feel discontent in originated in large measure from the prohibition against doing what was once allowed, indeed even holy, like sacrificing our children to the gods (Bergman 1992). These unconscious murderous and cannibalistic desires have left indelible marks on the religious rituals of the West. The murderous desires of children against parents (the Oedipus complex) and the murderous desires of parents against children (the Laius complex) are, according to Bergman, interwoven with each other as components in the existential conditions of mankind. But there are historical experiences of a much more recent date. We live in a world after Auschwitz. Our parents have been there or could have been, in one way or another. They knew or did not want to know. Our children are the third generation after the mass use of the gas chamber and the cremation ovens, after all the taboos were abolished once again – not as an exception, as a crime, but as a systematic operation with both bureaucratic and industrial overtones.

Without our really knowing how, the Holocaust and death factories have influenced our conscious and unconscious ideas, our super egos, our desires and our terrors. The technology of death and the cult of the death's-head have not been a parenthesis in history leaving no traces. The perverse, seductive, paranoid father – the Father – has been replaced by our ideas about the fatherless society, by the absence of the Law of the Father. Fifty years after Auschwitz we are complaining about the absence of adults to see, set limits and say no. The confusion between generations is said to characterise our *Zeitgeist*. The middle-aged generation, born in the time of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, refuse to give up their own eternal youth. At the same time the younger generation, the third, take over adult roles too early. To formulate that in the dualistic terms of Freudian instinct theory: the strained acceptance of libido, of Eros, turns into its opposite, the cult of death, and Thanatos looms in the wake of longing to subvert the boundaries of the ego.

In Adorno's widely quoted phrasing, it is impossible to write poems after Auschwitz. It has often been said that it is not possible to imagine or depict the Holocaust. The taboo against pictures and descriptions of the Holocaust have, however, never existed – all the art created in hiding places, the ghettos and concentration camps bear witness to this. On the contrary, I would like to assert

that Auschwitz demolished the taboo against describing certain phenomena. Both the crossing of boundaries between good and evil, human and non-human, living and dead, and "ignorance" of this have been replaced not only by the desire but also the technology to see all and show all. Today we would be able to witness the consequences of Zyklon B in a direct broadcast. There is logic in this: that *at the same time as the Holocaust is being denied there are no longer any limits for what can be depicted* – and neither perhaps for what may be done so that it will be depicted. No doubt it is more difficult to create poetry after Auschwitz – it requires an effort to restore the boundary between fiction and reality, between the portrayal and what is portrayed.

AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE BERLIN WALL

As I pointed out at the start, psychoanalysis does not provide us with any basis for comment on political change but only on the unconscious desires and defences brought into focus by the change. Let us take the Berlin Wall as a symbol. On one side of the wall we had "the good" Europeans or Germans and on the other "the bad." This distortion of reality was based on the defence mechanisms of denial, splitting and projection, well known to psychoanalysts from the individual inner scene, which taken together seriously jeopardise the reality testing. But the collapse of the wall is not only a victory for democracy. It is also a threat to the psychic survival of every East German; the depression which struck many citizens of the former East Germany has been noted by several writers. The old defences do not function; the ego ideal has changed key. Two paths are accessible to the individual: the painful confrontation with his own emotional reactions to the new state of things or flight from his affliction through new denials, splittings and projections. The various outcomes of this identity crisis are dependent not only on the ability of each individual to mourn his own inner lost object but also on the models he finds in the prevailing culture. We can also take the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia as examples. The aspect I want to call attention to is "the taboo" against national conflicts. These multinational hybrids were possible because of the same psychic mechanisms of denial, splitting and projection. There were no conflicts between nations inside their own borders, only outside them. When the outer "curtain" has been perforated we can observe what Freud (1896) described as the return of the repressed.

The world after the collapse of the Berlin Wall has sometimes been compared to the Middle Ages: several small centres, local power structures, the disintegration of the central authority. Denial, splitting and projection can no longer follow the simple east-west path. When these mechanisms, primitive but structuring for the ego, no longer function in the same way, the ego risks being flooded by archaic, violent and perverse impulses. When hate and envy are not held back by taboo, there is scope for uninhibited killing. The need for order and new psychic defences becomes acute, and this may lead to a *perversed reconstruction of frames, characterised by paranoid delusions*. "Ethnic cleansing" may here serve

as an example from the political arena. The prohibition against hybris, against mixing, is then revived as a perverse decree to uphold absolute cleanliness.

At the same time another change has been going on with consequences for our inner life and our culture which up to now have been difficult to assess. Modern media technology can give us an illusion of direct presence in the centre of events. We can sit at home and on the TV screen follow the advance of the troops over the desert on the border between Kuwait and Iraq. Through our computers we can make direct contact with a colleague in the besieged Sarajevo. On the one hand this can give us a feeling of omnipotence and on the other hand of powerlessness and unreality. *The new technical means of extending the range of our sense and motor organs confronts our psyche with new demands on our ability to test reality and defend ourselves against overstimulation*, to weed out unessential information. It is a classic psychoanalytical thesis that our culture, our civilisation, is based on repression. At the same time it is only the intellectual and economic elite who have the resources to set priorities independently on the flood of information, using the minimal, absolutely essential part. For the great majority the result may be traumatic overstimulation and the defences which accompany it, like encapsulation, screening, ego restrictions, etc. Until new boundaries between the inner and the outer are established the distinction between reality and illusion will remain indistinct. Natural disasters, such as for example the earthquake in Kobe, may be required to remind the Japanese stock market that the information world is not the only reality we live in.

THE LIMITS OF BOUNDARY CROSSING

The inner, psychic processes described above, bolstered by changes in the social arena and in the area of media technique, coincide in time and strengthen each other. At the same time as the limitless state of things appears to be an ideal, development here meets its own border. The desire to overstep and obliterate the boundaries of the ego, to break with taboos, is an important incentive to portrayals of man's destructiveness and sexuality. Crossing a boundary is possible only if there is a boundary to cross. Beyond the boundary everything is allowed. Passing a geographical border, leaving one's own country, is often the equivalent of leaving behind the restrictions of one's own superego. As soon as they are on board the ferry from Sweden, young people begin to drink without restraint and on the boat from Finland Finish youth do the same. When the culturally accepted boundaries for the permissible are shifted, the content of actions and pictures which were intended to challenge the taboos is also affected. Since accounts of man's destructiveness and sexuality adapt themselves to this they must tempt us with promises that we may be allowed to see something which has never before been witnessed, more genuine, more real, more harrowing. The indignation or the excitation which the depiction of violence is intended to arouse demands new, bolder pictures. This inflation of the crossing of boundaries finally leaves us bored and indifferent: still one more

picture of the wounded in the Sarajevo food queues, yet another series of blurred pictures of stretchers, the focus on the pools of blood on the ground. Paradoxically enough the taboo needs to be recreated so that we will be able to enjoy or be horrified at seeing and giving a name to the forbidden. TV news broadcasts warn us of shocking and violent pictures. The advertising for VCR films tempts us with an uncut version – more blood and sperm. *The dialectic of boundary crossing is that it restores the prohibition which was to be abolished.*

In the unconscious, crimes against taboos are punishable by the death penalty. For us humans the ultimate boundary transgression is our own death and that of others, the irreversible crossing. *The temptation and desire to cross boundaries is linked to the sexualisation of death and the mortification of sexuality.* The object of pictures of violence and pornography is always killed symbolically, transformed from a living, feeling subject to a dead thing, a waste product. The viewer of these portrayals goes through a corresponding transformation: his sensitivity and his ability to empathise with others have to be blunted and parts of his own subjectivity put between parentheses. This transition may be surrounded by protective rituals: the spectators gather at the Colosseum and the emperor declares the gladiatorial games open; we put the cassette into the VCR and settle ourselves comfortably on the sofa. When there is no refuge, when suddenly at breakfast we are served bodies twisting in death agonies or orgiastic spasms we are ourselves the subjects of violence. Our inner selves are outraged. We can turn away or continue to watch without seeing. The picture loses its substance, becomes a shadow play without reference to anything outside the picture. The symbolic meaning is killed. The eagerly awaited excitation in watching what is not allowed to be shown is transformed into distaste and boredom (Bruckner & Finkielkraut 1977) as a consequence of scotomas which characterise perverse scenarios. The new pornographers, violating man's ultimate, decisive separateness, do our fantasy work for us, Steiner (1967) writes in his essay, "Night Words." In this way we consent to being dispossessed of our own fantasies. What tempts us is that we believe we are overcoming death.

FASCINATION WITH VIOLENCE AND ESCAPE FROM SUFFERING AND MOURNING

Accounts of violence and perversion promise us that we will be vicariously freed from the shackles of our own consciences and social norms, that we will at last realise ourselves to the fullest. They promise to tear down all the prohibitions which have hitherto limited our chances. The less comprehensible the reason for violence seems to be, the more devoid of all emotional connections the perverse acts are, the stronger our positive or negative reactions are. Turned on or dismayed, we let ourselves be cheated. Foucault (1976) concludes the first volume of "The History of Sexuality": The irony of this deployment is in having us believe that it concerns our 'liberation'." These ever more sophisticated or realistic direct accounts leave a feeling of emptiness, satiation and disgust in

their wake. The promised liberation never comes, regardless of whether we regard it as an apocalypse or a Paradise on earth. The insurmountable boredom of pictures of violence catches up with us. In Freud's (1923, p. 46) description "the death instincts are by their nature mute" and "the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros". In the superego of the melancholic "a pure culture of the death instinct" reigns supreme (Freud 1923, p. 53). When perpetual repetitions of the same actions are presented without their historical and emotional context they lose their relationship to the conditions of our human existence and with our roots. Thus the depression recurs which the picture of violence, like every boundary crossing, has been passed off as helping us to escape. This void, covering up our own violent, destructive desires, is a pathological form of sorrow from a psychoanalytical standpoint, an expression of *the inability or refusal to suffer and to mourn*.

The desire to escape every limitation in man's existence ends in depression or destructiveness. Sabina Spielrein, who in 1912 suggested the first psychoanalytical phraseology for the death instinct, wrote that the most important characteristic of an individual is that he is a "dividual," *Dividuum*. Wurmser (1987) sees man's claim to the absolute as "the perversion of conscience" – it fosters the "demonic" side of the personality and leads to evil, destructiveness and violence. According to Shengold (1991) our original desire for "everything" is an expression of the utmost narcissism, and it makes "something" unattainable. Our murderous desires express a rage which turns against the inevitably frustrating reality we live in, represented by the indispensable parents. Only a tolerance for "no," "never" and "nothingness" can create a real place where it is possible for "someone" to exist as a separate individual with his own identity.

The psychoanalytical term "the omnipotence of thought" can help us to understand the effects of the spread of accounts of violence in the media. The concept was coined by one of Freud's patients, known as the Ratman (1909) and used by Freud in his research on taboo (1913). What the magic thoughts of small children, obsessive neurotic patients and people in primitive cultures have in common is that the thought is considered to be on a par with the deed. The distinctive mark of the new, global media is that it so easily brings up to date this archaic, infantile "omnipotence of thought" and in that way promotes narcissistic solutions. In its turn this narcissism is an effective obstacle to – and a flight from – perceived suffering, depression, mourning and working through. Added to this is also *the disintegration of the individual conscience by participation in the global network of viewers*. In Freud's research on taboo the archetype for this process was the primitive man's totem meal when the totem animal was killed and eaten: every individual is aware that he is doing something forbidden, allowed only because the whole clan is participating in it.

According to Freud (1913) man's cultural products are a first acknowledgement of *Ananke*, "Necessity", in the sense of limitations inherent in the existential conditions of man which challenge our narcissism. In this context it could be

added that the relation of art to "Necessity" has always been ambivalent. Every innovative work of art, like every new medium, is an effort to subjugate *Ananke*, overstep the boundaries in our earthly existence and re-establish a narcissistic structure. Art which ends there, however, will not be art; not until it reaches a bottom layer of depression can it help us to mourn. Subtle ties bind creativity to our narcissistic and depressive sides (Sz kely 1976; 1983; Haynal 1985; Kristeva 1987; Cullberg 1992; Crafoord 1993). Narratives which deal in depth with our existential conditions, with what makes us humans irretrievably doomed to live as separate "in-dividuals", dependent on each other, divided into two sexes and several generations, vulnerable and mortal, can help us to be reconciled with our existential conditions. A painful acknowledgement of *Ananke* is also an important part of the psychotherapeutic process of change. Let me illustrate this with three clinical vignettes and a film.

THREE PATIENTS AND THREE COLOURS

The first girl's colours were brown. Brown's inner world was filled with terror and perversion. She could sit for hours in front of the TV and watch the most brutal and cruel violent and pornographic films. Before the approaching termination of her psychotherapy Brown fantasised butchering her therapist and cutting up her dead mother. There was no limit to Brown's hate for her therapist and her mother, both of whom had unavoidably left her. Her own progress in therapy and in life confronted her with the need to accept that, as a matter of fact, she was able to look after herself on her own. When she took a decisive step in that direction she regressed and in confusion went out to her mother's grave. On the way back she met with the same type of accident which had led to her mother's death. By identifying with her mother she was trying to understand her mother's death and accept the fact that she had nothing to do with it, at the same time as she was trying to "be" the mother. Brown teetered on the brink of death and had to go through a series of surgical procedures. After one of the operations she thought that she had finally buried her mother and freed herself from her. Before the conclusion of the therapy she hit on the idea that she might go to another psychotherapist and this made her feel like a traitor. She had a whim that she might plant the same kind of potted plant as the one in the therapist's consulting room. Perhaps it would bloom for her, too, and then she could cut a flower and give it to the therapist. Actually she was still grappling with the separation from her mother's body and expressing a hope that she would be able to refrain from butchering and eating it. She could not keep the good plant herself but imagined that she had to pick the flower and give it back to the therapist, a representative of her mother. Before the next operation a few weeks later she mixed up ideas about the dead mother's mangled body with fantasies about cutting up her own body and that of the therapist. The therapist who had survived these onslaughts received a postcard after the operation which had on it a picture of the flower Brown wanted to plant, cut and give to her. That moment might be described as a transition from the Fascist mentality and the brown anal universe to a world where the difference between Brown and others and between the symbol and

what is symbolised may be allowed to exist.

The second girl's colours were pink. Pink's fear of her own destructiveness was hidden behind an idyllic facade. She was a sweet innocent, a china doll. As Pink approached the end of her therapy she wanted to make the process short. Apparently she perceived the upcoming separation as a sign of the therapist's sadism. Her own sadism continued to be denied and projected. At this point Pink's fantasies revolved around the desire to hold the female therapist's hand when a man penetrated her. With their long knives men were nasty creatures. With the therapist she constantly re-created a feeling that there was always something more to work with which she was not allowing the therapist to penetrate. Pink could not endure the difference between the bodies of a man and a woman, between parent and child generations, between patient and therapist, and she also did everything she could to deny the boundary created by the termination. She thought that psychotherapy was not worth anything if it was really going to end by the therapist and her being separated. Everything was ruined and it was just as well to begin slashing her wrists and burning herself with cigarettes. She thought that it helped her to feel real if she saw blood flowing. During one therapy session she stuck her fingertip with a needle, squeezing out a few drops of blood that she wanted the therapist to suck on. In this action Pink's vampirism mingled with fantasies about the therapist's bloodthirstiness. At the same time Pink was more and more openly seductive toward the therapist, alternating between inviting physical contact and reproaching her for the lack of it. Not until the therapist became aware of her own strongly negative reactions to Pink's bloodthirstiness and her homosexual invitations was she able to understand that at every session Pink was giving her the feeling that she was leaving something unfinished and unprocessed behind and that Pink's motivation was to get the therapist to realise how impossible the upcoming separation seemed to her. This became the starting point for a new round in her work with Pink's refusal to live in a world of differences.

Green, a middle-aged woman who looked like a teenager, was concerned about environmental destruction. The very first sessions of psychoanalysis aroused her dread of the future termination. She could not understand why she should embark on this relationship if she could not "get" the analyst and she complained constantly about the lack of mutuality in the relationship. For several years Green reacted to every separation from the analyst with hateful feelings and murderous fantasies, such as butchering and eating her body. Despite the violent quality in her emotions, dreams, fantasies and accusations Green did not need to stage them in her real life or assault her own body, nor did she need to hide her desires behind a facade of innocence and naiveté. She could speak openly about her reactions and her desires remained simply desires. The months before the end of the analysis were characterised by a profound mourning made possible when ambivalent emotions were allowed to come out. Green came to the final session with a gift for her analyst which in symbolic form summed up the inner change she had gone through but was also a symbolic representation of a funeral. She

was able to give up the illusion that her desire to have the father/analyst to herself would finally be satisfied after the termination, and she buried her fantasy picture.

Brown's and Pink's colours seemed like the reverse of each other but they both lived in the same archaic universe where their bodies and those of their mothers had grown together. Sometimes Green's colours might seem brown and sometimes pink. Even though she protested vehemently against every difference between her and the analyst, between her own and her mother's relation to her father, she could present her own conflicts in symbolic form. Certainly in her analysis she regressed to the same archaic universe in which Brown and Pink permanently inhabited, but in contrast to the two other patients her starting point was a deep depression and not a psychosis. In all three cases violence and perversion disclosed their demands to obliterate all differences.

A FILM

"No animals or human beings have been injured in creating this film," we are assured after Milcho Manchevski's film "Before the Rain." We can feel secure that everything was just fiction, "make believe." Photographer and Pulitzer prize winner Alex is on a trip to Bosnia as a newspaper correspondent after 16 years in London. On one occasion he observes to a Serbian militiaman, "Nothing is happening here." "We can easily fix that," answers the militiaman and shoots a prisoner. In this scene the boundary between fiction and reality is dissolved when the desire for an authentically shocking picture determines what becomes real.

Weighed down by guilt feelings, Alex travels to Macedonia where he wishes to make amends for his crime by trying to rescue the daughter of his youthful love. He winds up in the middle of a feud between Albanians and Macedonians ("they have oppressed us for 500 years") and witnesses how a brother murders his sister, an Albanian girl charged with having killed a Macedonian. He is finally killed by his own brother. In the first part of the film, "Words," we get no explanations for all the hate and violence we are witness to. Part two, "Faces," transports us to London only so that we may once again witness something incomprehensible. In a restaurant a Yugoslav picks a quarrel with a fellow countryman, insulting him until he is thrown out. In a few minutes he comes back and mows down the restaurant guests. The explanation does not come until the third part, "Pictures." Here we see a Macedonia where next door neighbours are full of hate for each other and we follow the fateful course of events in connection with Alex' rescue attempt. As in a Greek tragedy it proves to be impossible for Alex, for all of us, to stay out of things and circumvent fate: when Alex fights to preserve his own humanity he puts at stake the life of the girl he was to rescue as well as his own.

The whole film may be considered an exposé of the difference between the *viewer* of incomprehensible descriptions of violence without meaning or relation

and the *witness* to meaningful and comprehensible actions, however strange and frightening, being the consequence of a long and not immediately recognisable story. Shocking pictures from the war scene skimmed through in a London office, completely unacceptable in their invasion of everyday life, come gradually to be replaced by "faces" of people, their fates, the coherence of life. The violence in the epic story of the film with its dazzlingly beautiful, almost dreamlike pictures, is contrasted with extremely realistic pictures from Bosnia, reaching us at the same moment they are happening, invading us without giving us any connection or possibility to understand. The highly personal, stylised tale, filtered through the psyche of another subject, gives us a feeling of participation in our common human history. Within the frame of a ritually limited time and place we meet our own and our neighbour's destructiveness and once again discover that there is nowhere to flee. This family of ours who inhabit the earth are brothers and sisters who are killing each other.

PICTURES OF VIOLENCE AND PERVERSION ARE DIFFERENT FROM IMAGES OF *CONDITIO HUMANA*

Now that we have gotten so far into this discourse we may need to go back to some of the theses we formulated earlier and elaborate further on them. Our contemporary descriptions of man's violence, destruction and sexuality destroy the boundaries between reality and fantasy, between the portrayal and what is portrayed, between good and evil, living and dead, human and non-human. This plays a part in our longing to cross the boundaries of our own ego. In combination with denying that a taboo against portrayal of certain occurrences exists at all, these pictures present a perverse scenario, which may bring into focus corresponding aspects of our inner world. The preoccupation with violence and perversion in our culture can be regarded as a consequence of secularisation, the victory of rationality over faith, and a continuation of the disintegration of the boundary between sacred and profane. Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky articulated this perception of *Gott ist tot*: if God is dead all crimes and perversions are allowed.

After Auschwitz our culture was to a great extent characterised by the desire to see all and show all and by a denial of the boundaries for what may be depicted and what may be done. This involves a change in our relation to the ultimate limit of our existence, death. Great ambivalence characterises the cult of death which is continuing its advance in the shadow of the gas chambers and the crematorium ovens. On the one hand the taboo surrounding death seems to have been strengthened and on the other hand eliminated. Much of the concrete, physical content of death has been rendered invisible at the same time as pictures of dead and dying bodies are inundating us. We seem to be denying that our own death and that of others is one of the realities of life and a "beyond," at the same time as we violate previous taboos surrounding death and the images of it. If death is not a final crossing and if pictures of murder and corpses are a common ingredient of our daily lives, perhaps there is nothing we need to be

afraid of and nothing to mourn, either. This cult of death seems to be an attempt to come to terms with the narcissistic outrage perpetrated on us by the fact that we are mortal.

Present day techniques for the spread of information has extended the range of our sense and motor organs to a level which spans the globe. This *global expansion of boundaries of the outer organs of the ego* has not been accompanied by a corresponding change in our ego. The skin ego, the outer shield of our body image and our inner world, is lagging behind. This state of things resembles adolescence: the teenager's body changes faster than his chances of integrating it into his self-image, at the same time as the radical increase in the pressure of his instincts triggers regression. In contrast to the teenager, however, what we are talking about here is not a matter of the increased pressure of the libido but of the death instinct. The result is that we once again meet the archaic, infantile sides of our selves, this time under the hegemony of hate and destructiveness. Changes in the social arena and in the scope of the media coincide and together strengthen the regressive psychic processes, which have also been apparent in other epochs of historic upheavals.

The effect of exposure to pictures of violence and perversion may be described in terms of regression to narcissistic structures. Another consequence was the mortification of our psyche, a process which may be said to chisel out the "living dead" parts of our ego. Effects like these have previously been observed in a pure form in people who have survived a perverted world full of destructiveness, violence and evil – the survivors of the Holocaust, of torture and psychosis (Werbart & Lindbom-Jakobson 1993). The preliminary hypothesis that pictures of violence and sexuality may have traumatising intrapsychic consequences if they penetrate or contribute to the disintegration of the skin ego can now be confirmed. A massive exposure to images of man's evil and perversion, devoid of every emotional and historical context, may activate our "archaic remnants." Our own destructiveness and narcissism then come to life rather than being diverted and canalised. This may lead to a temporary or persistent reorganisation of the ego. The appeal of these images and the regression they conjure up lie in the fact that *the projection outward of our own aggressivity and hate is accompanied by flight from depression and grief*, manifest in the ecstatic expectation of being able to free ourselves from all the boundaries in our existence. This regression in the individual and in the group can be carried over from generation to generation (Kas et al. 1993).

What then is the difference between pictures of violence and perversion which serve the ends of the death instinct and accounts which promote the action of the life instinct in joining together instead of tearing down? One difference is between pictures which isolate a fragment of our life, ignoring its total emotional and historical context, and accounts which are incorporated into a human story. Another difference is between showing or viewing, and witnessing. This difference deals with *the presence or absence of a Narrator, an intermediate*

agent who is responsible for a certain psychic and symbolic pre-processing. The tales of the Greek bards, the Bible stories, the Islandic *Edda* and *V Isungasagan* or the Finnish *Kalevala* are not devoid of atrocities, but they are presented by someone who witnesses, relates and mediates. With the modern technique for the spread of information, the Narrator tends to become invisible and to be replaced by the medium. The mediating instrument seeks to obliterate the subject's presence as an intermediate link in order to be seen as a neutral extension of our perceptual organs. Unprocessed, non-symbolised pictures are still not testimony, for that requires a narrative communicated through another person's subjectivity. The portrayals which "rape" us are pictures without a tie to experience, empty of suffering, pain, meaning, and message. Behind the undoctored images of violence and perversion is an incapacity to endure suffering and psychic pain – in reality a refusal to accept mankind's existential conditions. In psychoanalytical terms it deals with *an attempt to make the Oedipal third invisible or to eliminate it.* Such pictures play along with our desire to cross the boundaries of our own ego and confirm the ego's temporary or permanent disintegration. Pictures of violence and perversion included in a description of *conditio humana*, on the other hand, contribute to the re-establishment of the ego as a psychic agent of our self-government.

TO RE-ESTABLISH THE EGO IS TO RESTORE DIFFERENCES

The world we live in, the incomprehensible events occurring all around us, all the dangers to our own existence as individuals and as a species, constantly threaten the ego's unity. When pictures of naked violence, the free outlet for murderous and perverse desires, are perceived as invasive and perforate the skin ego, the entire arsenal of our ancient defence mechanisms is activated. Besides denial, projection and splitting, I have mentioned such defences against traumatic overstimulation as encapsulation, screening, and ego restriction. The sense of our vulnerability and our own murderous desires are both so threatening to us that, faced with pictures of this kind, we may react by "de-identifying ourselves," keeping a distance, regarding reality as fiction, de-humanising others. This is not true; it can't be like this. It is happening there, not here. It is they who are doing it, not us. They are not like us; they are different. "They are only Jews," as an eye witness to the liquidation of the ghetto expressed it in Steven Spielberg's film, "Schindler's List." It's just a movie, not for real. The use of these defence mechanisms is facilitated by the pretended transparency of the new media. "This is exactly how it is..." When the presence of the mediating agent is made invisible and the re-editing by the "third" subject is denied, we can protect the unity of our ego by contrariwise looking upon the portrayal as completely opaque. There is nothing beyond the presentation; the medium itself is the message. In the end it is the murderer within ourselves, the bloodthirsty beast we do not want to know. As in neurosis and psychosis a massive use of our most primitive, rigid defences contributes to strengthening the effect of what we are defending ourselves against. This may lead to a *perverted reconstruction of frames, characterised by paranoid delusions.* When the taboo against portrayal

of certain occurrences is denied, that which we do not want to know can be fully possible.

In the current debate about the mass media in the USA, a paradox has recently come to light. It seems that everyone follows Simpson's trial in direct TV broadcasts. This murder affects the entire population since they can recognise themselves in the drama and identify with both the perpetrator and the victim. The pictures from Serbia, on the other hand, do not seem to affect the American public and are regarded as just pictures on the TV screen. The spread of pictures of violence by the media may contribute to the identification process (like the broadcasts of the hunt for and the trial of Simpson) or to de-humanisation and the onset of xenophobia ("We never believed anything else about the Balkan people"). Our attempt at "objective news reporting" may contribute to this de-humanisation. Inexplicable pictures of bleeding, maimed or dead bodies, often in direct broadcasts, may easily strengthen the feeling of unreality.

Pictures of evil, violence, destructiveness, and perversion may contribute to the re-establishment of the ego's boundaries if they counteract the disintegration of the ego and restore differences. In order that they may help us to work through our experiences, to endure suffering and to mourn, such descriptions have to fulfil certain conditions. The subjective position, with the portrayal separated from what is being portrayed, may make it easier for us to identify with one of the protagonists. The narrator's visible presence, the mediating agent responsible for a certain psychic pre-processing, can contribute to our leaving the role of the passive viewer and becoming an active witness. This also promotes the symbolisation and reconstruction of a historic context. Such accounts can help us to accept the loss of our infantile omnipotence.

In Freud's (1917b) aphorism one of the great injuries to the narcissism of man is that our ego is not master in its own house. Changes in our culture, in the political arena and the technology of the spread of information work together today to influence the boundaries between our ego and the outside world, between our ego ideal and perceived self-esteem, between the desirable and the undesirable aspects of our inner world. This is a new outrage to our narcissism. Our impulses, desires and fantasies are the same as they were ten thousand years earlier. Never before, however, has our repressed, archaic world had the same chance not only to break through to the surface but also to be rapidly spread over the whole world and shared by everyone. The boundary between the festivals of the Ancient Age or the carnivals of the Middle Ages and the every day life was circumscribed by a train of rules and ceremonies. The bard and the story teller could extend the range of our sense and motor organs because his ego was the mediating link. With the technology of today these boundaries are indistinct and the mediating subject is reduced to a minimum. Modernism, post-modernism, deconstruction have had the goal of breaking with various taboos, crossing boundaries, mixing what previously could not be mixed. For the archaic stratum in our ego the message that everything may be depicted may take on the

meaning that everything may also be done. In the world we live in today several different technological and cultural factors work together to activate the archaic and perverse sides of our personalities. All those who are depicting our passage and our fate on this earth are involved in this process of the breakthrough of archaic material. Restoring the ego involves restoring our ancient taboos and re-establishing differences between fiction and reality, between good and evil, the permissible and the forbidden, living and dead, human and non-human.

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FOOTNOTE:

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