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DIALOGUE 4: VIOLENCE, TRANSGRESSION, AND MODERNITY by ANTOON VAN DEN
BRAEMBUSSCHE & ANGELO VERMEULEN

Antoon Van den Braembussche In our previous dialogue we explored the question of whether or not it makes sense for artists to be engaged. In our times, many works of art reflect the authors' concerns about war, genocide, violence and other political realities ... Now what if we placed the subject of violence in a broader perspective? It has become habitual for images of violent acts we're confronted with through news and other channels to be put on display in museums. One example is that of the infamous photographs taken at the prison in Abu Ghraib. Toward the end of 2004, they were presented at *Inconvenient Evidence*, a museum exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York. You may be critical of this, but that won't stop it from happening. To give another example: the first thing you see when you open the *Documenta XI* catalogue is a long series of stills or photos from the international news channels. In other words, the line between visual art and visual culture has become blurred. The problems of representation would be an interesting starting point for our conversation today. My first question to you is therefore: What would you say are the most arresting representations of violence?

Angelo Vermeulen That's not an easy question. It's true that I'm fascinated by violence. That's why I showed you all those examples: manga series like *Eden: It's an Endless World!* (1998-2008) by Hiroki Endo and computer games like *Silent Hill* (1999-2007) and *F.E.A.R.* (2005-2007), as well as notorious content aggregator websites like *Rotten.com* and *Ogrish.com*. Why this fascination? I can't give a straightforward answer to that. It's a mystery to me why anyone should be interested in a genre like horror in the first place.

AVdB You seem to be particularly interested in 'fictional' violence. There's an element of addiction in that sort of violence. The fear, the threat ...

AV And the excitement, of course.

AVdB A kind of suspense. Highly addictive, and it has a very enjoyable, hard to describe feel about it. It also touches on the sublime, one of our previous subjects. Repelling, and enthralling at the same time...

AV Can you imagine anyone making sense of that? Isn't it contradictory that scenes of excessive violence can fill us human beings with great joy and satisfaction as long as

they're fictional, and that we find that same violence completely disgusting when it's real?

AVdB I think it has to do with a sense of delight, a sense of lust.

AV But that's not an explanation. That's just describing the same phenomenon in different words. What I'd like to know is how it's possible. Is it to do with the age-old opposition between Plato and Aristotle? Plato wanted to ban tragedy but Aristotle believed in its potential to heal and purge. I'm more inclined to believe Aristotle but I still wonder about the precise working of this purging. You're supposed to be freed from your fears by watching tragedy or representations of violence.

AVdB That's his idea of catharsis isn't it, the idea that fictional violence can help you to free yourself from it. It has a chastening effect, as it were; in the sense that it becomes less likely you'll do anything violent yourself in real life.

AV Plato argued for the opposite.

AVdB Plato said that the display of violence breeds imitation or, to use a modern term, breeds copycats.

AV You're referring to the debate that's going on in the media about violence in films and games. Particularly following tragic events like the murders at Virginia Tech in the USA.

AVdB But I think your question reaches further than that. What you're actually asking is: How does it come about? Is there a deeper explanation? What is the origin of this remarkable fascination with fictional violence? All these debates of Plato and Aristotle are still more or less descriptive.

AV You're right. Well, one explanation is biological. Take noradrenalin, for instance. The human body produces this chemical in response to fear, but it's also released in the case of sexual pleasure, which in itself is rather bizarre, of course. Noradrenalin is sometimes called the 'alarm hormone' because it prepares our body for danger. It's also an emotion intensifier capable of influencing the full range of emotions, from anger to joy. Our biochemistry apparently implies that fear can 'prepare' us for vehement emotions including euphoria. This argument is sometimes used to explain why people would choose to do such irrational things as bungee jumping. It's a mechanistic explanation for the existence of a link between fear and pleasure. But aren't we more than mere machine-like, chemically controlled beings?

AVdB I think there's also a cultural, almost socio-psychological explanation: the temptation to go beyond the line of what's forbidden, the attraction of transgression.

AV Exactly.

TRANSGRESSION

AVdB Georges Bataille, for example, said the phenomenon of trespassing – he called it *la transgression* in French – goes back all the way to the earliest days of human culture.

Given our background of Judaism and Christianity, with its central pillars of the Ten Commandments and our sense of sin, we seem to have found an interesting setting that we could start from, in combination with your remarks on the biochemistry of the human body, to try and explain people's fascination with fictional violence.

AV The biochemical approach reduces a 'human being' to a machine-like entity controlled by hormones and other substances. Our brain is thought of as a central computer that processes sensory stimuli, triggering the transmission of biochemical signal substances, physical responses and bodily sensations. And that would be it? I don't think I can live with that. I think this so-called 'explanation' only shifts the problem. What's the effect of images on brain matter? And how does it work exactly? I think such a cultural perspective is indispensable to obtain a more comprehensive idea. The fact that culture shields, enwraps and filters certain things is highly relevant. In essence, this is about regaining freedom.

AVdB It's very much about the rational and systematic way of life imposed on people like us in the West. On the other end of the scale, we can find the ambiguity of the desire for the forbidden, the attraction of transgression... Hence the importance of the fictional element. The fictional element creates the illusion of freedom.

AV You're talking about the West, but you can also find this in other cultures. The culture of secret fetishism in Japan, and so on...

AVdB Of course. It's very different when violence is real and tangible. In that case you can hardly speak in terms of freedom. Take the conflict between Israel and Palestine, where violence takes horribly predictable forms: action leads to reaction, terror to anti-terror, descending into a spiral of violence that is as difficult to avert as it is easy to foretell. But our debate is about the violence of surprise, of unpredictability. The threat, the fear is lying in ambush, ready to strike at any time, but you can't tell when this will be. It's the fear of the undefined. That explains the element of suspense, the thrill of the unpredictable, the reprieve ...

AV I'd say that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is very much an example of unpredictable violence, with its continuous threats of bombing and so on!

AVdB In the field itself it's just as unpredictable. But the nature of the violence, its progress and wider context, all this is anything but uncertain. It's terribly predestined, predetermined.

AV I agree, but does the unpredictable characterize representations of violence and death? I really don't know if you can say that. Let's briefly return to the manga series *Eden: It's an Endless World!* There's a scene where a girl, numb with fear, is standing on a land mine, unable to move. Suddenly, one of her legs is shot to pieces, causing the mine to explode. What remains is her head and torso, leaking intestines, while she's still alive. This climax is carefully built up and the representation of the final outcome has a tremendous visual impact. It's an example of intense graphic violence. But whether it contains anything explicitly 'unpredictable'?

AVdB You're both right and wrong. The effect of such extremely violent images is that of shock, caused precisely by their directness. That's very different from the addictive expectations built up in the horror genre. The addictive quality is not so much due to the final violent outcome as to the gradual build-up, the subtle reprieve. Hence the

importance of the unpredictable. This is in sharp contrast with the shock effect. In horror, what's relevant is not the fact that it happens, but the fact that it may or will happen. It's this build-up that fascinates. I honestly don't believe that it'll ever be possible to fascinate millions of people by merely showing them scenes of dismemberment, of bodies being ripped apart. What does fascinate them – look at the success of horror films – is the suspense, the time lag, the buildup of fear. Hitchcock was a great master of this technique.

AV I'm afraid I have several objections to that. I think you're referring to the thriller and not so much to the horror genre. In his collection of essays, *Danse Macabre* (1981), Stephen King distinguished three forms of horror - gradations, if you like. At the top level, he said, we can find 'terror', an overpowering fear of destruction. There are no ready-made recipes and as a writer or film producer you can suggest it convincingly only at certain moments. The second level is that of the more 'regular' horror, which is related to the physical, and can be achieved by showing something that is different in terms of bodily appearance. Hence the frequent recourse to monsters in horror fiction. This too generates a kind of fear, but it is slightly more predictable. And the third level, where effects are most easily brought about, is the level of 'disgust', of total repugnance. For example, when you explicitly show a body being slit open or a head bursting. Nobody will remain unruffled seeing that. King says his horror scenes should ideally have maximum impact but that if he feels a particular effect might strike the viewer as artificial, and therefore as ridiculous, he moves on to a lower level. That's how he seeks to play on his audience in varying gradations. I think that's not an uninteresting approach. In any case, I don't agree with you when you say that horror is characterized by suspense. Suspense can be an element of horror, but not necessarily so. The explicit pictures of accidents and executions on a site like *Rotten.com*, they're really sickening, that's pure graphic horror without suspense... and terribly disillusioning as well.

AVdB I think that's of a different order. When I used the terms addiction and build-up, I was referring to something that isn't visible yet. In the case of shocking images, the confrontation is only too visible, direct and almost immediate. This is something very different.

AV To you, horror is fundamentally related to fear, isn't it? But explicitly shocking images are about disgust rather than fear.

AVdB True enough.

AV Of course, fear and disgust are two strategies that are often combined in good horror fiction. A convincing horror film makes use of both all of the time and manages to find a proper balance. One particularly successful example is Ridley Scott's film *Alien*, made in 1979. You don't get to see the monster until the very end. And that's why the film is so good. It's interspersed with some very revolting moments, like the legendary scene where a small alien breaks out of the chest of an astronaut, the so-called chest-bursting scene. It's a fantastic movie; you're really glued to the screen, a classic in its genre. *Aliens*, its 1986 sequel, follows a completely different strategy, which is why, I think, the film was not quite so strong. It follows the 'more is better' principle. This time it's not one alien but whole hordes of monsters that are after the main characters, which makes good entertainment alright, but it's a long way from the level of the original movie.

AVdB You're right when you say it's not at the same level. The direct confrontation in this movie makes the impact less powerful – the sense of horror is stronger and more

convincing when the source of the threat is suggested rather than shown. Or again, the emotion of fear will be greater when the threat is indefinite rather than a direct presence causing repugnance or disgust.

AV These are two kinds of emotion available to authors of horror fiction – a manga, a game, a film. An excellent example of the use of disgust is the horror film *Cannibal Holocaust* by Ruggero Deodato, from 1980. It's also on my list of all-time favorites. The first time I saw it I was in Ghent at a Halloween party. The film completely ruined the party, leaving all of us totally upset by its unusually violent content. Strange enough, one of the most shocking scenes is the butchering of a turtle. In itself, this is hardly out of the ordinary, for our supermarkets are full of slaughtered animals. But the ritualistic nature of the cutting process is shown quite deliberately, almost like a documentary, rather loosely and in close-up. In this case, the use of documentary style in such a wholly insane fictional context has an utterly shocking effect.

AVdB I think it has become far more common in our culture to actually represent such violence. The horror aspect of 'showing hardly if anything' used to have a far greater presence. Not for nothing was Hitchcock a very great name in those days. I think the element of disgust or revulsion, the use of 'showing in a confronting manner', has increased enormously.

AV The need for transgression has increased enormously.

AVdB Exactly. Trespassing the standard, exceeding the limits ... The websites you showed are part of a cultural development that I find rather hard to take. But personally I think it's interesting to recognize the underlying evolution.

AV Our main subject so far has been fiction and the strategies available to artists within their fictional work. But websites like *Rotten.com* and *Ogrish.com* are a bit different. They're no longer fiction but more of a strange kind of documentary.

AVdB I'm not so sure if they're not fiction, to be honest. Its content has been filtered, taken from a particular perspective, etcetera. And often it's been extracted from its context.

AV You have a point there. It's almost like watching a violent fairytale. The immediate availability of all manners of violence, that's another thing you can hardly call realistic. That's rather fictional indeed.

AVdB Don't you agree it's also a bit morbid, a bit pathological?

AV Absolutely. But I find that appealing too. I like its disturbing and destabilizing quality. To me, the need for such transgression has an existential connection as well. The two human skulls that you can see in my study often stir reactions. In a very commonplace way, they obviously refer to the *vanitas* theme, but – as the biologist that I am – I find they remind us of the fact that underneath our skin we all look the same. It's an awareness you have to renew every day, as simple as that. There's also humor in those skulls. More or less like the clownesque members of the North American tribes we already talked about. Characters that, precisely by inverting the usual order of things, raise existential questions and make people laugh at the same time. In Goya's *Pinturas Negras* I have felt the same blend of horror and meaning. They're images of sheer violence, bewilderment and error that have helped me understand mankind through a kind of

personal spiritual experience... hence my fascination with horror. Michel Bauwens, a Belgian media theoretician living in Thailand, once told me the following about a particular Buddhist order. He said its members are accustomed to hang images of horror scenes above their beds, pictures of car accidents and the like, to remain mindful of the essence of human existence. The daily confrontation with the images shocks them into the awareness that there's no point in attachment. Trash as spiritual input. I'm not equating horror with spirituality, but still there is a fascinating link.

AVdB I have the impression that people of your generation are much more casual about horror and violence.

AV We approach media very differently. Whereas people used to be 'dependent' on image media – just think of traditional television – there is now more empowerment. We can now decide for ourselves what we want to see. And we can create content ourselves, like opinion articles, videos and photo reports. That's not unimportant. This interactivity and malleability of modern media makes that we feel less threatened by the violence displayed. As a viewer, you feel you're less dependent.

AVdB This explains the lack of understanding between gamers and authorities aiming to curb game violence.

AV What is fundamental to our relationship with today's media is that we simultaneously experience the transparent and the hypermedial – two aspects we touched on in our discussion of engagement and commitment. This is essential for a proper understanding of this evolution. As a gamer you can get totally absorbed by the illusion of the game but at the same time you can feel frustrated by its limited game-play options, its scripting or the poor quality of its 3D models. People used to believe that it was impossible for these two experiences to occur at the same time: a film either engrossed you, or not. And it is precisely the fusion of the transparent and the hypermedial that makes us relate in a totally different way to the violence displayed. We now tend to downplay its traumatizing potential because we can look beyond the images, beyond the illusion.

SHOCK VERSUS TRAUMA

AVdB The hypermediality or medium awareness is certainly greater among your generation. And to a certain extent, it can neutralize the traumatic effect of shocking images; because you're well aware of the fact it's only a game, an illusion, a virtual world, a *trompe-l'oeil*. You're immersed in this world and at the same time you have this meta-awareness, an awareness of the medium, so you can take an abstract view, distance yourself and interfere. Apart from that, there remains an important distinction between shock and trauma. In the case of shock experiences, the image itself can produce a traumatic experience. Representations of traumas are by definition concerned with past experiences. I think there's a major difference.

AV But if shocks can have traumatic effects, both notions somehow overlap, don't you agree?

AVdB Yes, I do. You'd best explain this overlap as follows. Each traumatic experience has two phases. First, something happens to you that is of such overwhelming power that at the moment itself you lock it out, as it were. This is called numbing, a kind of state of self-

hypnosis in which your conscience shuts out the experience at the moment it occurs. In fact, the shock causes the experience to be delayed, suspended. As if the event never took place. In the second phase, the original event must still be experienced. This triggers a condition of hyperarousal, of constant alertness to danger. The experience returns through hallucinations and nightmares, while trivialities in real life – a picture, a melody, a name, a message – will bring back the traumatic experience in a highly concrete, detailed and often-fragmentary fashion.

AV So what then is the exact difference between shock and trauma?

AVdB Once they've cut through the protection shield of our conscience, shocking images can originate the first phase of a traumatic experience. We experience the images as very direct, for the very fact that they bring about the initial shock, but they are immediately repressed into the subconscious, which has a traumatic effect. But to those who are not overwhelmed by the images, they will fail to be traumatic, at most triggering a purely physiological response. The visual representation of a trauma is not about uncovering the – suppressed – traumatic experience itself. This is usually very hard to achieve because immediate representation is impossible. It's rather about something that can't be shown or visually expressed per se. We must find an indirect way to suggest the unimaginable of the event. To give an example, Alfredo Jaar took 3000 pictures of the Rwanda genocide but eventually decided *not* to show any of them. One of the installations of his *Rwanda Project* (1994-2000), *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996) – about a woman who had to witness how her husband and two of her children were slaughtered – uses the shock effect as a *pars pro toto*. In a repetitive array, the viewer is first shown only text describing Emerita's atrocious experience, followed by a sudden and very brief confrontation with her eyes, shown in close-up – so as to make the viewer feel some of the heart-rending despair in her gaze.

AV It seems that representations of traumas are about the victim's point of view, whereas shocking pictures are often about transgression.

AVdB That's right. By the way, I think that the whole subject of transgression is also strongly related to the process of introducing and breaking taboos. Would you agree if I said that the shocking images – those websites are in fact only the tip of the iceberg – are about breaking taboos? Another question is if there are any limits to the breaking of taboos? Is it possible and okay to show everything? I must say that I'd have some moral remarks to make on this point. Our visual culture is very much defined by a thirst for sensation.

AV This sometimes is a matter of mere exploitation. The use of violence can be very gratuitous.

AVdB In your *SKANNER* project, which we already talked about, you set out to examine viewers' reactions to shocking images. Do you think there is a limit to what you can show? Is there a moment you'd say something's over the top? Not all viewers are equally well balanced, of course. Regardless of the fictitious nature of the violence, the impact can be overpowering, indeed disastrous. We often hear about the possible link between visual violence and particular outbursts of violence. Just think of the Columbine murders and what happened at Virginia Tech in the US.

AV That's a discussion about censorship. Do we want censorship, and if so, at what level? Is this a matter for the authorities to decide or should the choice be left to the parents, for instance?

AVdB Or education. I mean, without imposing a ban, you could think of fostering a kind of sensitivity in dealing with such images.

AV These are two different debates. Either you opt for traditional censorship, which means the offer is pre-filtered, or you allow everything, that is, in a context of constructive interpretation. How do you feel about that?

AVdB Not very favorably, to be honest. Rather than offer solutions, censorship tends to be counterproductive. One problem with censorship is that it won't be long before people start sidestepping it, which it almost seems to invite. There's a kind of implicit temptation to transgress, to break the taboo. The same may be said of the ban on weapons. Whether or not there's censorship, I'm more concerned with the moral aspects of the issue.

AV I also think that, on the whole, censorship does more harm than good to society. But I'm inclined to make an exception for young children. I feel that there are things we should be able to ban. And, yes, that would be downright censorship. Now, what you're advocating is improved conditions for critical reflection, isn't it?

AVdB As I see it, it's true that there's a tremendous, amoral presentation of images and violence. Such presentation often lacks a proper framework of references or context for interpretation. That's worrying me. I also believe philosophers could spend more time reflecting on violence. The philosophy of violence is a sorry affair indeed, particularly when you consider that violence is very much on the agenda these days.

AV Certainly not only in these days?

VIOLENCE: PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

AVdB Of course not. But in philosophy there's very little to be found about violence in earlier days, about violence as such. Why's that? Perhaps because most philosophers were hardly ever confronted with violence personally. For if you come to think of it, who were philosophers in ancient times? They were men exempt from the hard labor of slaves, away from the turmoil of battle. In more recent times, philosophers have also tended to live in environments that were relatively devoid of violence.

AV So can we say the Holocaust was a historical milestone in thinking about violence?

AVdB Even the process of reflection on the Holocaust was only very slow to develop. Perhaps one illustrious exception was Adorno, whose famous assertion that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' is still resounding in philosophy. But this cannot be said to be a philosophical reflection on violence either. It's rather a statement reflecting his indignation at the disenchantment of the world, the fact that the Holocaust signaled the definitive end of any enchantment and illusion.

AV What about Hannah Arendt?

AVdB Hannah Arendt's reflections on evil were a valuable beginning indeed. In her highly interesting book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), she tried to reconstruct the system of persecution of Jews, the so-called Final Solution – a vast machinery in which Eichmann was no more than a cog. To her surprise, Eichmann, although responsible for the death of millions of Jews, proved not to be the monster she expected but a dutiful, slightly overzealous bureaucrat. In an attempt to describe this, she coined the meaningful phrase 'the banalization of evil'.

AV And after that?

AVdB Following Adorno and Arendt, there is little to be said until around the year 1968. It is only in the last few decades that the Holocaust is receiving significant attention from philosophers, especially from those inspired by other disciplines, like psychoanalysis and historiography. The Holocaust has had a particularly lasting impact and we're still coping with it. But genocides in more recent years and the nature of radical evil and terror are infrequent subjects of philosophical examination. Of course, we have Rüdiger Safranski's well-known book *Das Böse* (1997) as well as *Radical Evil on Trial* (1996) by Charles Santiago Nino. But even a fairly recent book like *Radical Evil: a Philosophical Interrogation* (2002) by Richard Bernstein still links up with Kant's notions on radical evil and remains indebted to Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas, Jonas and Arendt. I do believe contemporary philosophical reflection has not really begun yet, and that the book on philosophy and violence is yet to be written. Such a book will play a major role in determining our attitude and reinforcing our analytical and moral sensibility.

AV Violence and radical evil, morality and values ... Is philosophy becoming a substitute for religion?

AVdB I don't think so. Violence is often inextricably interwoven with religion, it is embedded in it. Take the relationship between terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism over the past ten years. Further back in history, we had the Inquisition, the Crusades, and so on. More often than not, the most dreadful acts of violence were committed in the name of religion.

AV I was rather referring to your plea for a moral code, rules for dealing with those representations of violence.

AVdB Yes, but also insight. Insight is important too.

AV It is as if you're saying that we've ended up in a time of complete amorality, a time in which man seems to indulge in images and violence. It's a very lucrative business, so society is keen to keep it going. This must necessarily lead to a frothing whirlpool of demand and supply where there's no room for moral issues. Do you believe religion used to play a role that we have lost in our secular age? Is that what you're driving at? Has there ever been a different time?

AVdB A difficult question. Quite a lot of violence concerning a religion is not necessarily or immediately related to that religion itself or to its content but rather to a structure of power. In particular, it is when religion marries a power structure that violence comes into play. So you cannot simply identify religion with power or violence. The Islam is a good example. Western media tend to portray Islam as virtually equal to terrorism and

fundamentalism. It's extremely dangerous to equate the excrescences of Islam with Islam itself.

AV My question was actually about something else. Has there ever been a time when society was not pulled into this 'amoral' whirlpool I just alluded to? And if yes, how was this possible? Is it because previously there was a kind of morality, an insight into the representation of violence? Or is that a fable?

AVdB You may argue that morality did exist, but the problem is there were no mass media in those days. The comparison falls a bit short. Representations of violence – which is the subject of our debate – are actually ...

AV A rather new phenomenon.

AVdB Right. The websites displaying extreme violence you showed, are the embodiment of what Baudrillard called 'obscenity'. It's the visual culture of overexposure, the unsparring camera that shows everything and records every instant, implacably and minutely. The effect of photo journalism, the immediate objectification through the camera, which leaves no room or time for mystery or secrecy, no room or time for any empathy or compassion. All this evolves in a strictly amoral universe. Mind you, it's not immoral. What worries me is the moral indifference that characterizes the large-scale distribution of this visual culture, which at the same time, and maybe for that very reason, is a tremendous hit commercially. And again, you may dream of censorship, but it won't work.

TRANSGRESSION AND MODERNITY

AV To return to transgression: is this a typically modern notion? In our conversation about the malaise in art we talked about the artist's obsession with innovation. The importance they attach to the constant pursuit of new horizons, leaving behind trodden ground. We concluded that this ideology sharply contrasts with the reality of today's world of art: convention and ritual. Yet I do think this modernist premise is very important, that art should be able to shrug off the past to broaden existing options and explore new ones. In that sense, terrorism is a modern notion too: a small group of individuals that aim to establish a new social order through transgression; the idea that it's possible to bring down the ruling political establishment using radical action. From the conviction, of course, that this will be to the benefit of the world, that it'll be a step forward. In art too, it's a small group of individuals that are expected, through transgression, to help the arts – and in a wider sense, society – make progress. Is the notion of transgression key to Modernity?

AVdB It's certainly very interesting to relate transgression to Modernity, to modernization in general, including modernism in art. If you look at the role of taboos in so-called primitive societies, you'll find that infringing or breaking taboos was wholly out of the question. On the contrary, maintaining taboos was crucial, for this is what kept them together. Taboos were at the heart of their collective identity.

AV A kind of moral code.

AVdB Specific to a particular community.

AV And serving that community to define itself.

AVdB In Modernity, however, taboos have negative connotations. Since the Age of Reason, which laid the foundations for Modernity, breaking taboos has been identified with progress, modernization and rationalization. In modernism, particularly the avant-garde, this translates to an obsession with breaking conventions, a constant urge for innovation. So the whole idea of transgression is the pre-eminent driving force of modernism. Is that still the case today? I think we're currently in a post-modern or hyper-modern society, in which the logic of transgression or the idea of linear progress has come to a halt, degenerated into inertia. Transgression and the whole debate on innovation no longer seem to convince.

AV Personally, I'm totally engrossed by the idea of transgression. Pushing frontiers, that's very important to me, you know that.

AVdB But didn't you agree that today's development is rhizomatic rather than linear?

AV Yes, that's right. I'd like to follow up on our conversation about the malaise in art. I'm under the impression that you no longer believe in the potential for transgression. This agrees with something I've been hearing a lot these days: "Everything has been done before." Ours is a time of recycling, in which it seems impossible to achieve anything new. Everything has been explored, there are no more boundaries to cross. But is such a state of zero-development possible? I don't think so. I believe transgression will always be possible. What you just said about taboos in primitive societies, about a particular set of rules defining the community, doesn't that apply universally? Every social reality is defined by its own specific rules. Rules that can be infringed at any time, by definition. I don't think a wholly unregulated world is feasible. This brings me to the political conviction of anarchists – I don't believe in a society devoid of regulation and transgression. It sounds fine on paper, highly romantic, but you will need rules to protect the weak and prevent the strong from abusing their power. What's the anarchists' alternative to our current system? How can they believe in a society without rules? It won't work. You'd create an entirely arbitrary situation where the strongest will eventually oppress the rest – a question of survival of the fittest.

AVdB Anarchism has a very long history. It's an age-old dream I've always sympathized with, so to say. If only as an antidote to the terror of the alleged 'truth' that is claimed by so many political systems and beliefs! The anarchists' *ni dieu, ni maître* used to be music to my ears. But... the question is if it'll work in practice. There have been enough experiments – I'm thinking of the days of the co-operatives – to know that this is not so. Once you have a gathering of people, you need rules and agreements. I once lived in a hippy commune. In the end it proved that even communes wouldn't work without agreements. You can't really do without rules...

AV Meaning there will always be potential for transgression.

AVdB This kind of transgression is rather trivial, I must say. In fact, the whole subject of transgression in Modernity goes deeper. It refers to an underlying utopia promising cultural innovation. It's not so much about breaking rules as about ...

AV Reinventing yourself?

AVdB Yes, that's it! You can see this reflected in the modernist discourse, in terms like authenticity, originality, revolt, avant-garde. The very word avant-garde sums it up nicely – the advance guard, the frontline that maps, prepares, enforces and breaks open the new route.

AV In short, the belief in a future in which everything was supposed to be better...

AVdB Very modern things! I personally think that this idea has been severely undermined in the last twenty years.

AV It's not something I have much faith in either. To me, the key idea of transgression is that you question the existing order and explore alternatives. In this sense, I feel it reflects the principle of democracy. I think that's very important. What about Fascism and Communism, two monumental historical movements within Modernity? How do you feel they relate to transgression? Such authoritarian systems no longer allow for any kind of transgression at all, since they regard themselves more or less as the end of the transgression process.

AVdB Interesting question. Nazism and Communism often reacted vehemently against modern art. I think we can distinguish two aspects here. The first is that Nazism can be seen as the product of a high degree of modernization and rationalization. Whose perverse outcome was the unprecedented, fully structured, rationally prepared, industrialized mass extermination we've come to know as the Holocaust. Hence the singularity of the Holocaust. More recent cases of genocide have been more 'spontaneous'. Although originating in a long-standing historical awareness or driven by certain authorities, they are not so much embedded in the development of large-scale industry. A major element of Nazism – and we can see parallels in Communism - is its basically pre-industrial outlook. The Nazis went back to ancient myths, age-old symbols. Take the Nazi symbol itself, the swastika, which had been used thousands of years before by Hindus in a more sacral context.

AV This pre-industrial basis is well illustrated in the documentary series *The Occult History of the Third Reich* (1999). Amazing.

AVdB In their famed book *Le matin des magiciens* (1960), Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier presented the larger public – quite some time ago – with a clear account of the close relationship between Nazism and occultism. Very enlightening.

AV Quite unbelievable, a wholly unscientific and occult ideology underpinning a rationally constructed, technocratic political system.

AVdB A notorious example of the Nazi's unscientific and occult influence was their official adoption of the cosmology proposed by Hans Hörbiger, in spite of his highly curious and even insane 'world ice theory' (*Welteislehre*). Hörbiger held that the moon consisted of ice and that our solar system and the Milky Way were wholly made up of ice bodies. Although Hörbiger had published his cracked ideas in 1913 and died in 1931, the Nazi authorities declared his theory to be the only correct and official cosmology and proceeded to its widespread propagation! It was also regarded as a worthy alternative to the 'Jewish' theory of relativity supported by Einstein! A very odd jumble of irrational and modern scientific influences.

AV Do you have an explanation for this hodgepodge of rational and irrational elements?

AVdB I think the more occult, mythical, irrational side of Nazism was a major factor in facilitating an ultramodern form of capitalism. The irrational proved an extremely effective instrument to mobilize the masses, as Goebbels' propaganda clearly demonstrates. The Nazis' mythical basis also explains their profound mistrust of modern art, which they condemned as degenerated. Modernism was labeled decadent, forbidden, taboo. It was completely useless to their ideology, particularly their idea of blood and soil ... There's a parallel in Communism.

AV Communism is an exciting case in point. In the early days of the Russian Revolution, Modernism was fully embraced and even used for propaganda purposes.

AVdB But it didn't work. Why not? Because it couldn't be controlled! At one moment, Kandinsky returned to Russia, making a genuine effort to produce further 'edifying' paintings. Majakowski too did what he could, as did Tatlin. But most of them were thoroughly miserable, even to the extent of deciding to end their lives or flee the country. Those who continued to work within the system usually left an impression of inner conflict and ambiguity. Shostakovich is but one example of such conflict, poignantly interpreted by Ben Kingsley in Tony Palmer's film *Testimony* from 1987. Of course, there were also artists like Eisenstein who apparently did thrive under the new regime.

AV And thus experimental Modernism had to make way for communist Social Realism.

AVdB That's right! Social Realism has very interesting parallels with some Nazi art. And in both, Modernism was silenced. When we talked about the malaise in art, we were very critical of Modernism, but compared to Social Realism and Nazi art, Modernism was very progressive in the 1930s and 1940s. It's important to stress this here, because in the past few decades Post Modernist thinkers have not particularly spared the modernists' idea of progress, while in retrospect you realize that Modernism did have an important function.

AV I get the impression that pre-Great War cultural developments were simply repeated and reworked throughout the rest of the 20th century. Just think of all the things happening between say 1900 and 1914 or 1915, quite unbelievable! A truly fantastic era! And the tremendous pace of development, all within a time span of about ten years.

AVdB As I see it, that era is at the root of today's problem with progress in art, with our struggle with, what shall I say, 'the end of art'. I always tell my students: '1910, magic! Within a few years: Futurism, Dadaism, and Duchamp!' In fact, that's what's weighing us down now. You could say we're nearing exhaustion, we're getting 'tired of history', reaching the end of art. This of course doesn't go to say there's no more interesting art to be found.

AV No, sure... Well, returning to Nazism and Communism, I recognize a number of fundamental paradoxes. These ideologies regard transgression as taboo in art and culture but as essential for progress in other fields of society: technological innovation, economical advance, urban development and state reform. This led to a peculiar kind of schizophrenia, which in turn produced the well-known monstrous effects. Another paradox, which we already talked about, is the coalescence of the rational and the irrational. We find this marvelously expressed, both visually and verbally, in Goya's well-known etching entitled *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, usually translated as 'The sleep of reason produces monsters'. However, the Spanish word *sueño* means both

'sleep' and 'dream'. So is it when reason falls asleep that monsters appear? Or is it the dream of reason that brings forth monsters?

THE PARADOX OF RATIONALIZATION AND THE SUBLIME

AVdB I'd rather say the latter. Max Weber called this 'paradox of rationalization', the fact that rationalization will eventually lead to irrationality, in whatever field. A classic example is that of bureaucracy as an organization whose ongoing rationalization ends in completely irrational and even Kafkaesque situations.

AV The simultaneous presence of rationality and irrationality in Romanticism has always fascinated me. When at the age of twelve I discovered Poe's short stories, I was completely absorbed by them. On the one hand, I was captivated by the irrational of his horror stories and on the other, by his strongly analytical mind. Not for nothing is he the inventor of the whodunit. His *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* contains a wonderful passage where detective C. August Dupin, in the company of his assistant, is walking down the street when he unexpectedly answers a question on his companion's mind. Naturally surprised, the latter begs Dupin to explain how on earth he could know what he was thinking of. Dupin's answer is a fine example of deductive thinking, and the detective explains that he had minutely followed each and every of his assistant's movements and facial expressions. Another example is his essay *Maelzel's Chess-Player*, about an 18th-century chess-playing machine exhibited as an object of curiosity around the country. In this story, Poe sets out to expose the supposed machine-operated chess-player, showing that there is somebody inside the automaton. Here too his approach is extremely analytical.

AVdB I do think the examples you give of Poe rather reflect different aspects of the same personality. They are not quite as paradoxical as Goya and Weber, who reveal the rational roots of irrationality, etcetera. Would you agree to that?

AV By 'simultaneous' I particularly mean to say that both rationality and irrationality were cultivated and developed to the extreme, that Romanticism is essentially schizophrenic.

AVdB I'm not so happy with the term 'irrational' because of its limitations and pejorative overtones. In Romanticism, on the other hand, I can recognize something sublime. You could also interpret it in terms of the imagination, as something that cannot be conceived or expressed in words.

AV This craving for the fantastic is not only a matter of the imagination but it also points to fundamental metaphysical doubt. People don't want to be reduced to machines. That's the *horror limitis* I was referring to in our talk about science and art: on the one hand, there's the refusal to take the world exclusively as a determinist machine, and on the other, there's the boundless fascination with the very concept of the controllable machine. And that's exactly how I tick myself; that paradox is deep inside of me.

AVdB What I find really fascinating – something strongly linked up with Romanticism – is everything related to the *Jenseits*, a beautiful German word meaning 'beyond'. The sublime is very closely related to this invisible, this supernatural world. The French call it *au-delà*, which has the same meaning. It evokes art in all its richness and creativity, as well as its aesthetic experience. But you also need form, technique, and the rational, to make

the invisible tangible, however indirectly this may be. You need the rational to control the overwhelming, the fantastic, the feeling. So in fact, art involves a lot of expertise and know-how. Many feel that art should be pure and come from the belly, but that's not quite true.

AV Craftsmanship is indispensable.

AVdB But craftsmanship alone would but produce an empty shell; it would be a mere pose, a hollow ritual. The *Jenseits* and the sublime – already existing as notions - were taken to unprecedented heights in the Romantic era. It's only since Romanticism that the vacant, the ungraspable, the infinite, Kant's 'the abstract', the inexpressible, the ineffable, has taken a form. An 'indirect' form that, rather than representing the sublime - because the sublime is not an object and its essence cannot be rendered – evokes the experience of the sublime. You could therefore say *The Monk by the Sea* (1810) by Casper David Friedrich is a metaphysical painting. It's fairly abstract already and heralds abstract painting proper, which didn't emerge until the next century. Turner's works are another good example, for he shows the unshowable, or presents the unrepresentable, as Lyotard was to say about the avant-garde much later.

AV Can violence be sublime to you?

AVdB Yes, particularly violence that I feel is shocking, that I run away from, that I shrink from, or even maybe that I have problems with morally. Besides, the sublime invariably comes with an initial moment of shock, a shudder, with anguish – a moment of horror if you like. If I associate violence with the sublime, I'm linking up with an interesting development in more recent years in the discourse on the sublime. The discourse used to refer to ecstasy, in its positive meaning, even bordering on the mystical experience. The unspeakable was considered in positive terms. In the past twenty years, however, the discourse has also begun to highlight the negative sublime, or the painful sublime, that is, the sublime whose suffering cannot be expressed. The Holocaust is an example of such an association with the sublime. And I believe this has greatly enhanced the discourse. Both absolute highs and absolute lows in human culture have now been incorporated as experiences of the sublime. Both involve shock. With the former, the initial sense of shock eases into inner peace or pleasure, while with the latter, the feeling of anxiety remains, ceding neither to peace nor to pleasure. That's why the sublime is such an interesting idea for today's visual culture and visual arts. It covers both aspects. It can now also refer to the absolutely ugly, to horror, to the absolutely repulsive.

VIOLENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

AV On another issue, could you say that violence is always associated with technology? Isn't violence often technological and *vice versa*? To me, man is first of all a *homo faber*, a tool-making animal. I know that philosophy has a long-standing tradition of regarding man first of all as a linguistic being, but personally I'd rather say that it's technology that defines the essence of human existence. Violence, now, seems to be invariably made up of a technological component and an irrational component. A kind of thoughtful madness sometimes. Do you agree?

AVdB I have a number of objections. I think you'd have to extend your definition of technology to incorporate the medium of language. I think violence always requires a

particular medium. When you use a stick to hit somebody, for example, the stick is the medium. If you look at it from this perspective, language can be a medium for committing violence much in the same way as an instrument or an artifact can. From this basic idea, there isn't such a big difference between technology and language. Human interaction evolves in and through media. We exteriorize ourselves in and through media. This includes committing violence. Taken in a literal sense, a medium is something that mediates, whether a language or a machine. It's an interesting vision in order to emphasize the human condition, but also, in doing so, to give violence a place.

AV Violence has two components: the mechanical, technological, structured component, and the almost impulsive, irrational component.

AVdB I don't know if it's always irrational.

AV Violence can of course be the result of thoughtful reflection.

AVdB The wider question is whether life would be possible at all if there were no violence. Each movement, each breath could almost be said to be a kind of violence. We tend to have very negative views of violence.

AV Christian views.

AVdB Very Christian. But you could also put it the other way around and say: "There's no life without violence." Particularly as a biologist, you should ...

AV I was about to say that: there's violence at all levels of an ecosystem all the time. If you think of violence in nature, one of the first things that cross your mind is the classical example of predation: the lioness going for the throat of the innocent antelope. People often say that you cannot compare this violence with human violence, because animals kill only to satisfy their basic needs. But chimps also raid and rape, forming gangs to attack neighboring colonies, kill the males, and rape and abduct the females. That is downright warfare among animals to expand their territory and spread their genes. Plants – traditionally the epitome of peace to us human beings – also compete in violent ways. Just look at what happens when an old tree in the rain forest falls over, leaving an open area. All manner of plants and trees immediately enter into fierce competition for the new space and light.

AVdB Again, you can also take a positive view of violence and regard it as a kind of life energy, a driving force behind self-transcendence. If you allow me to give my point of view as a philosopher, I'd say that violence – also ontologically – as a way of being, fulfils a highly creative and life-contributing function. This is very much present in Nietzsche's works. Nietzsche's vision strongly emphasizes the 'affirmation of life'. This is reflected, for instance, in his *amor fati*, the love of fate, acting against the odds. To Nietzsche, life is always characterized by *more* life, which is also underlined by his – often greatly misunderstood – notions of *Übermensch* (superman) and *Wille zur Macht* (will to power). The will to power refers not only to life-preservation itself but also to the preservation of life in the sense of continuous self-transcendence. In the context of this conversation it should be noted that Nietzsche was criticized for his more or less biologist and Darwinist thinking.

AV How would you say this is approached in the East? Isn't the prevailing attitude in the East – of peace loving and non-violence – diametrically opposed to this?

AVdB Eastern thought strongly emphasizes non-interference, non-action. That was one of the major differences between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer, admired beyond measure by the young Nietzsche, ended his life in Eastern philosophy-inspired acquiescence and resignation, a kind of impassivity that Nietzsche eventually railed against. Yet, as I see it, even non-action is a form of action, and non-interference, a form of interference.

AV Has this had any consequences for the Oriental attitude towards technology?

AVdB Definitely... although not all Eastern traditions are equally averse to technology. Needham's studies, for instance, have made clear that Chinese civilization saw a major technological development, with a number of important discoveries being made long before the West. But Confucianism has had a tremendous influence, next to Taoism. As far as I can see, interest in technology has been less prominent in Buddhism, although Buddhism has attained a high level in architecture, and particularly in the conservation and distribution of sacred literature. Historically, however, Buddhism has been devoted pre-eminently to the practice and development of techniques aimed at self-perfection.

AV It is also the least violent belief. Is that a logical combination?

AVdB I think so, yes, although you should again be wary of making rash generalizations. Inversely, the huge technological advances in the West are based on a scarcely spiritual and highly functional view of nature. There is a passage in Marx' *Das Kapital* (1867) about the relationship between man and nature in which he emphatically points out that man must subdue nature. Such an approach would raise very serious objections with modern ecologists. Technological evolution in the West is based on a very specific view of man and nature, which sharply contrasts with Eastern evolution, which does have a major spiritual component. And it seems that in the last few decades people in the West are becoming increasingly aware that we can learn from that spiritual development, if only to give our technology a more human face.

AV The Abu Ghraib scandal is a good case in point. Isn't it a coincidental combination that the world's technologically most advanced army displays utter amorality in scenes that seem taken directly from the works of Marquis De Sade?

AVdB A monstrous alliance between technological progress and spiritual vacuum.

AV The way those soldiers staged and represented the violence, with carefully selected headgear, attributes and poses. The pictures they took and the really weird compositions they made. These are all perverse creative decisions.

AVdB Genuine mise-en-scenes.

AV They made gruesome theatre. Like living 'sculptures'. Some of the photographs immediately brought to mind Jake and Dinos Chapman's horror sculptures. Reality surpasses everything.

AVdB It's irrational, but it was prepared and executed quite deliberately. You can see that the photographs weren't taken at random. They are the product of obscene, rational premeditation. Anyhow, the whole case is a sad example of the discrepancy between technological progress and spiritual and ethical decline. The weird staging and

uncanny aesthetics underline the makers' lack of spirituality. It's really very bizarre. There's a magnificent statement by Henri Bergson that springs to mind here: *Le corps agrandi demande un supplément d'âme*, which literally translates as 'the enlarged body requires a supplement of the soul'. It would make an appropriate caption to the Abu Ghraib photographs. *Le corps agrandi* is technology having expanded its power exponentially and requiring a spiritual counterweight, which is lacking.

AV But is warfare involving a 'spiritually well-versed army' realistic? Is it feasible?

AVdB Warfare involves a variety of ethical codes, of course. Take the war in Iraq; the fact that US soldiers are murdering women and children is unacceptable also to the US commanders, let alone the international press and public opinion. I believe it's extremely important to exert such ethical pressure on the parties involved in conflicts, by denouncing and seriously investigating this kind of excess, through the Hague tribunal.

AV Every army is bound by some very specific ethics. Not everything's permitted. At the same time, that defines their weakness. The history of warfare evolves by leaps, every time ethical restrictions are stretched further. Napoleon, for instance, introduced the concept of 'democratic warfare', by which he meant the waging of war with vast armies and large numbers of casualties, unlike the more stylized and conventional battles of the Ancien Régime. In fact, the Napoleonic era foreshadowed large-scale conflicts like the American Civil War and both World Wars.

AVdB A kind of transgression, but within the ethical codes of warfare.

AV The Guantanamo Bay prison camp is a burning topical example of the transgression of military ethical codes. The Geneva Convention is being ditched before it is a hundred years old.

AVdB And it's only natural for people to get enraged about it. I think the Guantanamo debate – which hasn't ended yet, by the way – will feature large in contemporary historiography. A state that imposes the principles of human rights on the world but is itself guilty of gross violation of those rules. Can you think of a greater paradox?

Translated from Dutch by Dick Van Spronsen

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