Why do we see him naked?

Politicized, spiritualized and sexualized gazes at violence

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In: Reaves, J.R., Tombs, D. & Figueroa, R. (2021 eds.) *When did we see you naked? Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse.* London: SCM Press, 195-209.

Evil resides in the gaze which sees evil everywhere.
Friedrich Hegel

Introduction

Nails went through his hands and feet. A spear pierced his side. A crown of thorns pushed onto his head. Sharp objects on the lead-tipped whip dug deep into his skin. The torturous attacks penetrated Jesus' physical body during the crucifixion. Some claim that Jesus could have suffered penetrative sex too as part of the humiliation and torture. Among them is David Tombs, who has convincingly demonstrated how Jesus suffered forms of sexual humiliation when he was stripped naked, but the possibility that Jesus was raped – he argues – can never be textually and historically confirmed due to the privacy of the Roman praetorium. Since prisoner rape was a standard torture practice in the first-century Roman Empire as well as in modern-day oppressive regimes, Tombs suggests that we cannot simply dismiss such likelihood, particularly considering its significant theological and pastoral implications for present-day survivors of sexual violence.[2] We argue that, while historical accuracy of the rape of Jesus may never be claimed, there might be an interpretive community who, through their particular interpretive lens, give meaning to and subjectively experience Jesus' crucifixion as penetratively sexual. While this entire volume builds on the work by Tombs and others who have proposed to construe the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of torture with dimensions of sexualized violence,[3] this chapter will focus specifically on the viewers of those torturous acts. Seeing, touching and penetrating are considered in many criminal codes to be three levels of sexual transgression. Visual (and auditory) exposure includes being forced to watch pornography of exhibitionism, being forced to undress and show oneself, or unwillingly being exposed to sexualized language or imagery. The second level of transgression, through touch, refers to one's body being approached without consent for bodily contact, including

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stroking and masturbation. Penetration of the body, usually oral, vaginal, or anal, is the third level. This three-level categorization shows that viewing is intrinsically connected to the other levels of sexual transgression. Put more clearly, viewing is the first level of transgression of sexual boundaries.

If it is indeed meaningful to read the crucifixion narrative as a story of sexualized violence, which is a matter of grave pastoral and ethical importance, what then does it mean that Christians over the centuries have gazed at Jesus' tortured body and meditated on his dying process? Rambuss, for example, critically examined seventeenth-century poems contemplating the ways in which Jesus' body was penetrable and penetrated.[4] The opening of the body in these devotional lyrics becomes a locus for the believer engaging most intimately and erotically with Christ. An example from our own times could be Mel Gibson's graphically violent movie The Passion of the Christ, drawing hundreds of millions of viewers to their local cinemas and garnering massive support and special viewings from churches for their youth and not-yet-believing visitors, as if this revelling in torture, blood and body mutilation was the best way to convey a message of love and grace. In another form of spiritualized gaze on sexualized violence in our contemporary postmodern world, certain Christian BDSM (BondageDiscipline, Dominance-Submission, Sadism-Masochism) subcultures deploy spiritual and sexual readings of violent biblical narratives, including the crucifixion of Jesus.[5] To claim that there is an intrinsic connection between religion, sexuality and violence is not new. Whereas Freud stressed the importance of the sexual dimension and interpreted religion as a symbolization (and sublimation) of sexuality, Girard saw violence as the more primary impulse and interpreted religion as a response to it. This implies that when we study sexual violence and religion, we should expect these three dimensions to overlap, interact and even amalgamate.

Therefore, how does this blurring of spirituality, power/violence, and sexuality make sense in our contemplation of the crucifixion? The focus of this chapter will be on these intersections from the perspective of the viewer and it will reflect on the intimate connection between contemplation and complicity, between veneration and perversion, and between violence, sexuality, testimony and the sacred. What do our politicized, spiritualized, or sexualized gazes at violence imply? Obviously, we do not claim to know what individual persons believe or experience when they are spiritually moved by the crucifixion narratives or its visual representations. Our intention is to critically highlight possible meanings of the fact that this grotesque story of (sexualized) violence has become such an important source for spiritual contemplation. We do so by exploring three dimensions of gazing at the crucified body: the politicized gaze of sexualized violence, the spiritualized gaze of the political violence, and the sexualized gaze of spiritual violence.

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Politicizing the gaze

Visual technologies not only represent traumatic events that are in many ways unrepresentable and unimaginable in their brutality and terror. The representation itself also has potentially traumatizing effects on its viewers. This effect also means that viewing violence can change the viewer by transcending the ordinary experiences and conventions.[6] Many religious traditions play into this through their violent images and narratives. Violence can indeed be understood as a dimension of the sacred in its life-giving and destructive shapes.[7] Žižek even argues that the fundamental value of Christianity lies precisely in this 'perverse core' of violence.[8]

Watching violence is never merely symbolic or entertaining. Research on visual media violence has shown that exposure to violence on movies, media or video games increases the risk of violent behaviour on the viewer's part, although it is never the only factor to explain violence.[9] Seeing is always in a certain sense affective. The media frames of horror that become more graphic and realistic can increase violent behaviour.

Similarly, violence – and even more watching violence – is culturally and socially embedded. In our previous research on wartime male-to-male sexual torture, we showed how sexual violence is not simply the act of one individual against another but is embedded in group-based performances aiming at the visible evidentiary.[10] Similarly, Eichert argues, from an audience-focused perspective in the context of wartime male sexual violence, that 'the audience of violence is the perpetrator's fellow soldiers, and violence becomes a way for the perpetrator to impress or bond his peers'.[11] This spectatorship of pain and its iconography of torture always requires visual confirmation, as Sontag would put it: if there is no evidence, there is no atrocity.[12] Being exposed to the ritualistic violation of sexual brutality undermines the self-evident boundary between the self and the other. With these intersections of violence, spectatorship, atrocity images and religion in mind, how are we to understand the gazing at the spectacle of Jesus' brutalized body? Are the viewers of Caravaggio's 'Flagellation of Christ' or Gibson's The Passion of the Christ looking for spiritual redemption or inspiration? Is this visuality of violence what Sontag calls the ultimate horror of revelation, 'a negative epiphany'?[13] How do these visual tropes of horror and its modes of representation become part of an intrinsic socio-political and even spiritual routine of being witness?

Jennifer Glancy argues that 'Jesus' tortured body is a truth-telling corpus'.[14] An important question for us here is: How do religious practitioners understand it in order to bear witness to an aesthetic pursuit of this 'tortured truth'?[15] Or more precisely, is bearing witness to the images of the tortured truth/body what Ricoeur calls the 'total engagement not only of words but of acts and, in the extreme, in the sacrifice of a life' that belongs to 'the tragic destiny of truth'.[16] In a somewhat similar vein, Dutch philosopher of religion Stoker argues that the testimonial character of faith refers on the one hand to a

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manifestation and proclamation of the sacred and on the other to the individual witness of what he or she has seen.[17]

Kyo Maclaer argues similarly in her research of 'testimonial art', wherein 'the art of witness … bids us to consider how a remembered image might gain new hold on our lives and actions'.[18] In this sense, the visual testimonial representation of the crucifixion might be seen as a kind of existential act that sets up special ethical, spiritual and epistemological demands.

Therefore testifying is an ethical (and spiritual) action, and visual testimonio is its result, an intelligible act of re-creating the real. Within the context of bearing witness, the attitude of trust is ultimate, but not blind. We do not claim here that the material image of Jesus' tortured body has some sort of sublime or intrinsic 'ontological weight'; it is, rather, grounded in the performative function of bearing witness.[19] In line with this, Guerin and Hallas remark that the visual role in religious mediation in the process of witnessing 'can be seen to rely not upon faith in the image's technological ability to furnish empirical evidence of the event, but upon faith in the image's phenomenological capacity to bring the event into iconic presence and to mediate the intersubjective relations that ground the act of bearing witness'.[20] In this sense, the central aspect of visual testimonio is confession; a mechanism of reinforcement and spiritual commitment.

The testifying gaze thus makes a connection between the brutality of the (political) violence and the commitment of the viewer. This can turn into a political statement, as in Metz's notion of the 'dangerous memories', linking the suffering of Christ with the suffering of others. These are, to borrow Moltmann's coining, very specific memorial testimonies of 'vicious circles of death', situated in various dimensions of life.[21] All of them together – the vicious circle of poverty situated in the economic dimension of life; the vicious circle of power situated in the political dimension of life; the vicious circle of racial, cultural and sexual violence situated in the cultural dimension of life; the vicious circle of industrial pollution situated in the environmental dimension of life – culminate in a testimonial vicious circle of meaninglessness and God-forsakenness, situated in the sphere of lived religion.

These testimonies may also imply a cry for justice, as when they are brought to judicial hearings.[22] Viewing the sexualized humiliation and violence of the crucifixion through the lens of testimony, the viewer is invited to take seriously the inhuman brutality exerted against Jesus, just as it has been and is exerted against the millions of victims of political violence. By testifying about and against this brutality, the viewer takes up the 'ethical memory'[23] and responsibility to act in the service of restoring human dignity.

Spiritualizing the gaze

The second dimension we want to explore is one of spiritualizing the violent gaze as exemplified in Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ. This highly

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controversial 2004 film was described by Gibson himself as my own personal meditation.

I focused on that because I found it healing for me because, like most of us, you get to a point in your life where you're pretty wounded by everything that goes on around you … by your own transgressions … by other people's. Life is kind of a scarring thing. So I used the passion as a meditation of healing myself.[24]

While Gibson himself is known to be committed to a very traditional – and even sectarian – strand of Roman Catholicism, his movie was widely acclaimed, especially by evangelical churches and televangelists. According to Abbott, Gibson's choice in directing films has clearly moral overtones connected to his faith. Nevertheless, it is equally possible to read his filmography from Mad Max (1977) through Lethal Weapon (1987–1998), Braveheart (1994), and Hacksaw Ridge (2016) as displaying a consistent interest in violence, perhaps even 'redemptive violence', as Walter Wink called it.[25] Gibson himself stated that 'the audience has to suffer in order to understand it more'.[26]

Although Gibson claims that his movie was an effort to offer an authentic interpretation of the suffering of Jesus, as opposed to other depictions being 'inaccurate and influenced by the politics of the time',[27] Gibson's version fits perfectly in the post 9/11 experience of a tremendously violent world. It is worth noting that the infamous violent abuse by American soldiers of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad became headline news in the same year that The Passion of the Christ was released. Regardless, the explicit way in which the movie suggests that it provides an authentic rendering of the passion narrative is most probably the reason why many Christian organizations and news outlets were so positive about it even though they would usually speak out against similarly violent movies without explicit Christian content.[28] The Passion of the Christ focuses almost entirely on the final twelve hours of Jesus' life. Apart from some flashbacks, the whole movie is devoted to the portrayal of the extreme suffering of Jesus, essentially following the 14 classic stations of the cross.[29] However, the movie is much more graphic and explicit about the violence than the biblical texts it purports to depict.[30] Moreover, the (androgynous) demonic figure that appears throughout the movie can be seen by some as a strange addition that undermines the authenticity that the film claims, whereas others see it as a strong reminder of the cosmic battle between good and evil that offers the background to the story.[31]

All of this leads us to this question: what happens when we spiritualize the gaze at violent torture in the way that Gibson suggests? Obviously, within the framework of the classic theology of the cross, this dramatized rendering of the passion narrative can indeed serve as a source for meditation, not unlike medieval paintings and statues. The grotesque violence then serves to impress the viewers with the sacrificial willingness of Jesus to surrender his life for humankind. The role of God remains mostly invisible but becomes apparent in the scene where a tear falling from God's eye falls to the earth and causes an earthquake upon its impact. This ambiguous image – is it love, sorrow, or revenge? – follows immediately after a scene in which a large dark bird pecks

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out the eyes of the rebel who mocked Jesus.[32] Again, the question could be raised whether God desires, requires, or abhors the violence the viewer is witnessing.

This ambiguity is directly linked to a fundamental ambiguity about the position of the viewer per se. According to Karpman's drama triangle, the three positions of perpetrator, victim and bystander are constantly in motion, so that who is in the role of the bystander at one point may be in the role of victim or perpetrator at the next moment.[33] Especially is the bystander – the viewer in this chapter – continuously challenged to move to one of the other positions. The theological question then is whether the viewer is invited to see themselves as victim or as perpetrator. Gibson's quote about his meditation on the passion actually refers to both when he speaks of his own transgressions and those of others, thereby not distinguishing between the victim and the perpetrator. Because it is unclear whether one should identify with the suffering Jesus or with the evil humans causing that suffering, a fundamental ambiguity remains at the centre of interpretation. One might argue that this is commonly the case in theological reflections on the cross, but the ensuing ambivalence may be problematic for contemporary victims of violence, as their confusion between the two roles is not resolved but exacerbated. As victims of sexualized violence may be particularly prone to this kind of confusion, the ambivalence becomes all the more pertinent.

The spiritualized gaze at violence may thus reinforce and inspire those with specific theological assumptions, but it may also blur the fundamental distinctions between victims and perpetrators. Moreover, the spiritual gaze may obfuscate the ethical discernment that is directly linked to this fundamental distinction.

Sexualizing the gaze

To explore the meaning of the sexualizing gaze, we need to ask first how some Christians indulge in worshipping the suffering so much – including different cinematic treatments of the crucifixion. This simple question involves many others. How does visual violence affect us? Does this pleasure-in-pain add something to our spiritual experience? What is the visual and spiritual pleasure (jouissance in Lacanian terms) of watching the pain and suffering of others? This enjoyment can best be grasped via the question: what are we aiming and striving for when we look at a sexually tortured body? This goes, of course, beyond a simple phenomenological account of the symbolic and fictional narrative of the extreme (sexual) violence of the cross. Referring to Sade's victim characters – and the ambivalent 'aesthetics' of crucifixion – where the 'sufferers' endure all manner of horrific torturous practices but retain their primeval beauty nevertheless, Lacan claims that in this jouissance and its radical objectivization of the 'suffering other' 'the sadist himself occupies the place of the object, but without knowing it, to the benefit of another, for whose jouissance he exercises his action as sadistic pervert'.[34] Or in the words of Žižek,

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what eludes our gaze in violence is precisely 'an endeavour to strike a blow at this unbearable surplus-enjoyment contained in the Other'.[35] How does this iconography of (sexual) torturous practices and aestheticization of suffering negotiate the relation between the individual and the sacred, the symbolic and the lived, the political and the cultural, and the spiritual and the sexual? Are we still aware of the brutality of images of sexually tortured bodies or have we become desensitized or, even more, sadistically enjoy this idea of 'beauty' obscuring the horror? In what way does this iconography of extreme violence contribute to the production and construction of the lived religious realities and imaginaries, the spiritual contemplative practices of the cross, the sacred texts, rituals, and ultimately the truth and the sublime – all as mediums of transcendental material/aesthetic world-making?

In this section we therefore seek to explore the possibility of reading the passion narrative as penetrative sexual violence and how such reading might potentially generate an alternative sense of spirituality for some Christian readers. The final part of this chapter then discusses not only that the passion narrative may involve sexual violence, as eloquently argued by Tombs, but also the possibility that the gaze on the crucifixion scene and its grotesque violence might generate a form of sexualized engagement.[36] Specifically, we ask: in what ways can the visuality of the torturous practices of the cross be experienced as both sexual and spiritual by Christian audience? To explore this question, we have built on and sought to extend contemporary academic conversations between sadomasochism and Christian theology[37] to elucidate what happens when we sexualize the gaze at violent torture in the way that, for example, Mel Gibson suggests in The Passion of the Christ.

Both BDSM practitioners and scholars have identified how pain, torture and humiliation can be and have been connected to Christian traditions, including the passion narrative, in sadomasochistically sexualized ways. The queer theologian Robert Shore-Goss – who is also a chaplain for a premier gay BDSM club in Los Angeles – has narrated how he had a plenitude of sadomasochistic inspirations from the Church, from looking at the barely-clothed body of Jesus on the cross every Sunday, meditating on torturous stories of the martyrs and saints, self-flagellating himself, and even wearing the catenulae, a chain-like device with barbs and spikes turned inward, when he started Jesuit novitiate.[38] In Indecent Theology, Marcella Althaus-Reid has also criticized theologies at that time, such as liberation theology and even sexual theologies, for being still too decent and reluctant to include sadomasochistic fetishisms in their analyses.[39] She gave an example of how Jesus dressed as a Peruvian peasant was rendered comprehensible and even invited empathy; but Jesus depicted as Xena the warrior princess, dressed in sexy leather clothes and crucified with her lesbian lover, was deemed outrageous and perverse. She proposed that such fetishism might be an obscene trace of Christianity, in the way that this closeted world of perversion might just be a new form of the centuries-old praxis of pain and worship. Indeed, there has been a rather poor joke among contemporary Christian BDSM practitioners about Jesus forgetting the safe word and dying on the cross. While such fatal abandonment is precisely what

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BDSM practices avoid,[40] it is evident that both Shore-Goss, Althaus-Reid, and contemporary BDSM practitioners put the crucifixion scene at centre stage in connecting sadomasochism and Christian traditions.

In line with the focus of this chapter on the gaze or the audience of the crucifixion, we draw attention to how sadomasochistic eroticism might not only be experienced in a 'real' BDSM practice but also through the act of watching, reading, or imagining. The global success of the Fifty Shades novels and films, for example, demonstrates how such fictions and visual representations may offer a way for non-practitioners to virtually experience forms of sadomasochistic pleasure. It might not be very surprising, then, that a contemporary Christian audience with a slight sadomasochistic taste might find eroticism in contemplating the torturous practices in the passion narrative as depicted by Mel Gibson, such as the naked Jesus moaning and groaning when flogged. Whether identifying with the sacrificial willingness of the bottom, the top who hardened his heart for the atonement of humankind, or bystanders who were intensely watching in fear, the crucifixion provides a culminating moment of pain, trust, surrender and resurrection for a contemporary Christian audience. In what ways, then, can this sadomasochistic resonance be experienced as spiritual?

In the last two decades, scholars and authors have documented how BDSM practitioners reported a sense of spirituality in sadomasochistic engagements; there were also workshops specifically offered to teach how to reach spiritual goals through BDSM. One of the earliest works in this area is Geoff Mains' book Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality published in 1984, which has often been considered the first to connect sadomasochism and spirituality.[41] Some contemporary examples include Lee Harrington's Sacred Kink: The Eightfold Paths of BDSM and Beyond and Raven Kaldera's Dark Moon Rising: Pagan BDSM and the Ordeal Path.[42] In Christian traditions, Shore-Goss proposed that the key concept linking sadomasochism and Christian spirituality is the notion of transcendence through voluntary pain. In the modern world, we medicate ourselves immediately to escape pain; sacred pain has very little religious significance, although traces of it can still be found, such as the practice of fasting, barefoot pilgrimage, sensory deprivation, social isolation and, in some other religious traditions, body piercing. In this sense, sado-masochism and Christianity have a spiritual compatibility: 'Both … use pain to transcend the self and create a new self.'[43] This notion of transcendence through voluntary pain resonates with other theologians and social researchers who have studied sadomasochism and spirituality.[44] We identify at least three recurring themes within this scholarship that explain the ways transcendence were experienced through sadomasochism. The first is ascetical spirituality. As in monastic traditions, BDSM positions the body as a site of discipline in order to grow, transform and perfect oneself. Ordeal and suffering of the body become one of the paths into spiritual awakening or communion with the Divine.[45] The second is a sense of freedom in radical submission. The notions of surrender and obedience have long been associated with religions and religious practices. It is unsurprising that studies have documented how BDSM communities report

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a sense of spirituality and transcendence in being the submissive bottom.[46] A bondage practitioner in Greenough's study, for instance, feels very 'freeing from the inside' while being severely constricted on the outside.[47] Correspondingly, the tops often reported a sense of being a caregiver, ritual facilitator, spiritual guide and therapist or healer in supporting the bottom's growth as a person.[48] The third theme is ecstatic experience through an intensified sense of the here and now. The experience of intense pain and intense pleasure heightens our awareness of the here and now, creating an altered state of consciousness as compared to our usual self.[49] As Stein describes it: '(BDSM) banish(es) all mundane distractions … you spin away free into no place and no time, the universe and eternity'.[50] As a result, it is common to have a very peaceful feeling after a BDSM scene.[51]

Nevertheless, the context of these studies are real-life BDSM practice and practitioners; little is known about how virtual or imagined sadomasochistic eroticism could have spiritual potential for a non-practising audience. To our best knowledge, only Wijaya Mulya has discussed this potential in his examination of a specific Japanese-originated subculture of sadomasochism (otaku),[52] in which a sense of spirituality is found in the coming together of ostensibly incommensurable desires, such as pain and pleasure, real and unreal, the material and the spiritual, violence and ethics. However, further explorations are needed, particularly to respond to the pressing question of ethics: if what makes BDSM practice ethical is its consensuality (careful negotiations of pain and pleasure to avoid injury and promote care), what are the ethics of sexual jouissance in watching the suffering of others in a non-simulated, and perhaps non-consensual, context such as the passion narrative? Can Jesus' willing sacrifice be considered a form of consent to his suffering? Or, as feminist theologians have argued, is a Father making his son willingly sacrifice his life not consent but 'divine child abuse'?[53] Is Jesus' crucifixion 'an evil, unnecessary, violent, unjust act done by humans which should not be glorified, and cannot be justified' as a religion?[54] Even depictions of simulated and 'consensual' sexual violence as in pornography and extreme films have generated an amplitude of academic debates hitherto unresolved on the question of ethics.[55] While these thorny issues may indeed require deep and careful examination, it is beyond the scope of this chapter, which modestly seeks to argue that gazing on Jesus' crucifixion sexually, namely through a BDSM interpretive lens, is a possibility; and that such ways of seeing might also have potential for the spiritual – although this is not completely unproblematic.

Conclusion

Taking clues from Tombs and others about the (possibly) sexualized nature of the crucifixion, this chapter has aimed to offer some reflections on the role of the viewer. Looking at very distinct cases, the chapter distinguished three dimensions of the viewer's gaze. The politicizing gaze leads to a socio-political stance, the spiritualizing gaze may inspire but also obfuscate the ethical

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requirements by intentionally leaving open ambiguity between the role of victim and perpetrator, the sexualizing gaze may appropriate a new connection with the sacred. Whether these three dimensions are the most significant or indeed relevant for viewers should be assessed in more empirical studies.

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