

From Pasolini's *Salò* to *Boko Haram*: On the Pedophilic Mentality in Social Perversity

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Abstract. In his 1975 movie *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pier Paolo Pasolini seems to refer to the corruption of those who once had been the meta-social guarantors and of their meta-psychical reference points (René Kaës [2005] called these reference points “metapsychic guarantors”). This corruption can be found in the shift from authority to authoritarianism and from the object of desire to the perversion objectless. In Boko Haram mentality we have a similar process: the little girls raped soon become slave wives and the little boys are quickly transformed from sexual objects to violent automata (I mean, child soldiers).

Keywords: Pier Paolo Pasolini, Social perversity, Boko Haram.

In his review of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 movie *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, the Italian writer Alberto Moravia emphasizes the main difference between de Sade and Pasolini: the former is strongly sympathetic with his libertine characters and cruelly scorns their victims, whereas the latter has a feeling of revulsion for the four fascists and of sincere compassion for their victims. Pasolini neither puts himself in fascist oppressors' shoes nor represents the oppressed victims as accomplices.

Moravia (1977) writes: “*In spite of the fact that they are terrorized and totally submitted, the oppressed young people lack that masochism that would allow them to be depicted as victims*”.

It is also for this reason that the reader of the sadomasochistic and twisted constructions of de Sade's novel feels more annoyed and bored than disgusted and, on the contrary, the spectator of Pasolini's movie feels compassion, but also rage, and empathy for the abused and tortured young people.

In his 2006 movie *Pasolini Prossimo Nostro*, the Italian director and screenwriter Giuseppe Bertolucci proposes a different view of Pasolini's movie and stresses how profound and jarring is the intentionally unbearable contrast between the obscenity of the represented subject and the extreme formal and aesthetical accuracy. This contrast is also highly emphasized by the fact that, according to him, Pasolini intentionally avoided to provide a psychological characterization of the characters, in particular the young victims, and eliminated every element able to provoke a sense of compassion and empathy towards them. For this reason, Pasolini had referred to some of the characters' psychological features only if necessary. As he clearly pointed out, if the victims had been characterized as able to provoke compassion or sympathy in the audience, the movie would have been impossible to tolerate.

Despite the critics are so different, they both stress Pasolini's compassion for the victims.

Basically, *Salò* is a political movie divided into four segments whose titles refer to the geography of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in particular that of the Seventh Circle of *Inferno*: *Anteinferno*, *Girone delle Manie* (Circle of Manias), *Girone della Merda* (Circle of Shit), and *Girone del Sangue* (Circle of Blood).

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Four men of power of the Republic of Salò, the Duke, the Bishop, the Magistrate, and the President¹ command a group of soldiers to kidnap some boys and girls of partisan families and to take them in a country villa. With the help of four former prostitutes, they impose a 120 days sexual tyranny defined by a rigorous code according to which the boys and the girls must obey if they want to live.

The characters of the Duke, the Bishop, the Magistrate, and the President make ridiculous and pervert not only the typical functions their roles bring on, but also the basic values of civilization. For example, the incest is praised in opposition to the Oedipal elaboration, the feces appear as more appetizing than the milk, the buttocks are equivalent to or even better than the breast (Meyer, 2015).

By representing the socio-political structure of fascism and caricaturizing it by choosing the set of the movie in a country villa where a group of young men and women are abused by a group of torturers which are also men of power, Pasolini aims to propose not only a representation of that world but also to reflect on the hidden or latent primitive structure of our present day world (Bigliani, 2015).

Pasolini's *Salò* has a closed and self-referential structure in which, often disguised as forms of seduction, the violence and the abuse of power take place. In front of the villa Pasolini focuses on an arch: it is the hedge that encloses the villa's garden. This hedge is the border between life and death. The villa is the set in which power is celebrated and represented. The young people have no possibility to go out from it: they are prisoners of a system and in this sense the term "claustrophobia" can be seen as the only possible to describe this situation (Meyer, 2015). Their only possibility is to try to transgress (this verb derives from Latin *transgredi*, to go beyond), to cross the border, and to break the barrier, putting at risk their life. They must violate the walls of isolation, secrecy, and terror. So, the disclosure is the only possibility to go beyond the taboo of the word, beyond a dark and opaque silence.

Pasolini seems to refer to the corruption of those who once had been the meta-social guarantors and of their meta-psychical reference points [René Kaës (2005) called these reference points *meta-psychical guarantors*²]. This corruption can be found in the shift from authority to authoritarianism and from the object of desire to the perversion objectless. There is no justice, only rank. There is no truth, only manipulation. There is no trust, only obedience. Further, it can be found in the shift from a form of transgression that, at the developmental level, implies a possibility of change and thus the construction of new limits, new contexts, and new containers of our personal identity to the pseudo-transgression of the *claustrum*. If transgression is a possibility of change, it can be conceived as a difficult availability to new forms of contact and confrontation.

According to Donald Meltzer the life in the *claustrum* is the life in the internal maternal space. The child's unconscious fantasy (more precisely, that part of the child's fantasy opposing the parents, intrusive, created by an projective identification and made omnipotent by masturbatory activities) construes this space. The resulting feeling of empowerment is completely disconnected from the feelings of helplessness, from the lack of trust in the mother, and from the child's vulnerability. But such empowerment is clearly based on fraud. In this sense, *Salò* is a representation of this internal landscape and of the object relations that therein unfold (Meyer, 2015).

It seems that the old men in power have self-protected in order to neutralize their feeling of inadequacy, helplessness, and inferiority through a social status that leads them to feel superior, special, appreciated, and powerful.

¹ Representing respectively the power of the caste, the clerical power, the judicial power, and the economic power.

² Kaës introduces two concepts, that of "metasocial guarantor" of the social life (firstly introduced by the sociologist Alain Tourain) and that of "metapsychic guarantor" of the mental life, in order to connect the changes in the normative power the law (myths and ideologies, beliefs and religion, authority and hierarchy) with the psychical individual suffering.

It is very likely that the personal histories of these men are characterized by excessively intense (and often eroticized) relationships with their mothers and by painful deprivations from their fathers. We can argue that these kinds of relationships between a boy and his parents often cause vulnerability and narcissistic defenses. These defenses imply unrealistic representations of the Self, self-esteem instability, hidden feelings of inferiority, deprivation, and shame and also the desire to reach and maintain a position of distinctiveness and superiority.

The real fathers and their function are underestimated in favor of a narcissistically idealized educational skill is so radicalized that sometimes can lead to rape and torture. The domestic universe and its mundane finiteness counterbalance an educational passion characterized by absoluteness. There is no room for fathers and mothers, and so for a third figure able to provide a triangulation in this idealized educational relationship.

Freud (1925, p. 273) remembers to have accepted the old bon mot according to which “(...) *there are three impossible professions (educating, healing, and governing)*” since the beginning of his career. Educating (that means *being good parents*) is certainly an impossible profession: according to Freud, the best parents are those aware of this impossibility because they can deal with their omnipotence by recognizing their limitations. This can help to avoid the damages of an absolute idealization of the educational role. We can find the absence of parental function and a radical religious-educational absoluteness in the dynamics of identity of today’s terrorist organizations.

The question at this point is whether Pasolini’s denounce presented in *Salò* can even be considered as a sort of premonition of a world that will end up with the triumph of the death instinct and thus with a generalized genocide (Bigliani, 2015).

Boko Haram (the meaning of the name is: "Western education is forbidden") is a jihadist group based in northeastern Nigeria, also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon. Estimate of the group's membership varies between 7,000 and 10,000 fighters. Boko Haram killed more than 13,000 civilians between 2009 and 2015. Upwards of 1.5 million people have been displaced in the violence. Since 2009 Boko Haram have abducted more than 500 men, women and children, including the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014.

Although Boko Haram is a highly dangerous group, it is not clear how it is managed and chooses what to do, which are its long-term goals, which are its sponsors (Bauer, 2017). Some of the nearly 300 girls and women freed by Nigeria’s military from the forest stronghold of Boko Haram were so transformed by their captivity that they opened fire on their rescuers. A counselor who has treated other women freed from Boko Haram captivity said some had become indoctrinated into believing the group’s ideology, while others had established strong emotional attachments to militants they had been forced to marry.

Some of the about 90 women and girls freed by the army four months ago in Yobe state, for example, had upset their community on their return by maintaining that the militants were good people who had treated them well. The trauma suffered by the (abducted) women and girls is truly horrific. Some have been repeatedly raped, sold into sexual slavery or indoctrinated and even forced to fight for Boko Haram. A woman named Sadiya, kidnapped and knocked up by her rapist, says: "*Except my name, they took everything away from me*" (Bauer, 2017).

For more or less a year, families have not known whether their daughters are dead or alive, married off, sold off or violated as a result of their captivity.

In general, like also ethnic abuses committed by Boko Haram, these violent acts do not seek to reach an authentic pleasure: they seek to reach power. The abuser wants to reassure himself that his power actually exists and, as a consequence, that he exists with his physical and ideological force.

The rapist seeks the power in order to frighten, humiliate, and degrade the object through a process of dehumanization. In other words, he aims at denying the object and also the subjective nature of the other. He seeks the power not only in order to dominate, to gain possession of the other's body and mind like a predator, to inflict pain and employ violence, but also to erase the other's will out and to subjugate him. In the case of humiliation, the horror that other people can transform a person in object (that can be called objectification or reification) might lead to suicide or to desire to kill everyone who is simply suspected to be a perpetrator of this process of objectification or reification (Bigliani, 2015).

The perpetrator feels powerful only if he can deal with partners whom he deems inferior and seducible. There is no time for waiting on the process of physical and mental maturity: the little girls soon become slave wives and the little boys are quickly transformed from sexual objects to violent automata (I mean, child soldiers). In these case the ideology is nothing but a sort of rigid shell able to trap and not to contain the uncertainty and the confusion typical of this developmental step. Thus, such uncertainty and confusion are disguised as pseudo-maturity. It is the *claustrum* condition (in the case of Boko Haram, the forest represents the *claustrum*) that often fosters the child's availability to support his persecutors' precepts. I mean a mechanism of identification with the aggressor, as Sándor Ferenczi (1933)³ and Anna Freud (1936) showed, allows the child protecting himself from the psychotic catastrophe and experiencing a sort of bond or a belonging to a group, no matter which one.

A precocious process of 'adulthood' and an explicit use of sexuality, force, and violence are often employed as defenses against the perception of the pain caused by neglect and affective deprivation, disorientation, guilt, and loneliness.⁴

Marie Antoinette Ferroni (2004, p. 195) writes: "*The fear of having experience of the fear (Bion, 1982) forces the person to lock her thinking down and to suspend her emotions. This has a high price, I mean, the price of mental life and survival.*" Since they reached the status of warriors and its consequent privileges, it is very hard for the boys who had experience a so strong mental deconstruction to find peace and to return to a normal life. It is common that a feeling of no return that make them tied to the group they are part of or lead them to search for new conflicts and to become mercenaries, criminals, drug addicts or, in general, social outcasts.

Because the religious affiliation and the possibility to exercise an absolute omnipotence bring a high degree of excitement in his mind, the Boko Haram children's kidnapper presents characteristics of narrow-mindedness. Thus, there does not seem to be sufficient mental space available for other psychic operations except cruelty (Brenman, 1988).

³ In his *Clinical Diary* (1933a, 10th of May) and in *Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child* (1933b), Sándor Ferenczi reminds us that in cases of sexual abuse children tend to identify with the abuser: "*Trough the identification, or let us say, introjection of the abuser, he disappears as part of external reality [...]. In any case the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist and in traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness. The most important change, produced in the mind of the child by the anxiety-fear-ridden identification with the adult partner, is the introjection of the guilt feelings of the adult which makes hitherto harmless play appear as a punishable offence*" (1933b, p. 162). The concept of identification with the aggressor enables us to see the relationship between the trauma suffered by the child and the abusive behavior he subsequently acquires in a new light, not simply in the mechanical terms of cause and effect, or of automatic repetition against other children of the seductive acts to which he has been subjected. Ferenczi proposes a metapsychological version of Freud's seduction theory combined with trauma theory in which he points out that the lack of detailed analysis of the trauma's external origins can be dangerous. This concept is more complex than the concept delineated subsequently by Anna Freud (1936), in which the victim introjects her aggressor by assimilating the distressing experience and thus, through the mechanism of identification, assumes the role of the aggressor and his features and transforms herself from threatened in threatening.

⁴ In 2001 the French journal *Adolescence* dedicated a monographic issue titled *Adolescences en guerre*. Marie Antoinette Ferroni reviewed it in issue no. 101/2004 of the Italian journal *Gli Argonauti*.

The fact that the persecutor uses both violence and seduction in the name of a fanatically devoted membership to a political and religious organization allow for the temptation of the child to accelerate his development. In this sense, we can see a sort of *hyper-maturity* (but I believe that a better term is *pseudo-maturity*) that, moved by the need to *hyper-control* the present in order to survive, leads to a *hypertrophic adaptation* to external reality to the disadvantage of internal reality by adopting tactics, strategies, and patterns of behavior proper of adulthood.

It is not only, as Meltzer (1992, p. 71) says, “to worm one’s way into someone confidence, to intrude by eavesdropping and spying into another’s privacy, to impose oneself on the thought processes of another by lies and threats, to bind a person in submission by pseudo-generosity, couples with threats of foreclosure – the devices are myriad for insinuating into the mind of the other”. Because (Meltzer continues) “[...] the atmosphere of sadism is pervasive [...], the hierarchic structure of tyranny and submission forebodes violence” (p. 91). “Truth is transformed into anything that cannot be disproved; justice becomes talion plus and increment; [...] obedience substitutes for trust; emotion is simulated by excitement; guilt and the yearning for punishment takes the place of regret” (p. 92).

The victim has no possibility to develop an internal place in which his Oedipal desires can be played: he can magically enter into adulthood. The child’s fantasies are at the same time confirmed, falsified, and degraded because every fact of life can take place only inside a confined space like the forest and so every necessary comparison and essential negotiation with the external world is not allowed. As we can see, the children are not only strongly traumatized but cannot even create a plot of their trauma: their psychic apparatus cannot assimilate, reformulate, or give new and different meanings to the traumatic aspects of their experience in any way.

In conclusion, Pasolini’s *claustrum* can be found today in a context of serious social perversity that should deserve a lot of attention from all of us. History seems to repeat itself but not in form of a farce but in that of a great tragedy. It is as if we were not able to reflect upon what history has taught us until now.

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