

Sarajevo Beyond the Mirror Stage

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Sažetak

Ovaj članak je filozofski osvrt na probleme vezane za preživljavanje nasilja, genocida i pomirenja, proizašao sa konferencije o pomirenju i ljudskim pravima, održanoj u Sarajevu. Uzimajući poster masakra Srebrenice 1995. kao simbol i koristeći se radom Lacan-a i Althusser-a u svezi sa identifikacijom, ovaj članak istražuje one kojima je namijenjen ovaj poster. Posebno, podrazumijevanje čovječnosti u "zločinima protiv čovječnosti", svjedok ubijanja, svedočanstva i „nagon smrti“, etika posmatrača zločina i konačno pomirenje žrtve. U Južnoafričkoj Republici pomirena žrtva je dobila moralnu pobjedu, iako ne i materijalnu ili ekonomsku pravdu. U Bosni je situacija drugačija, djelimično jer se sudi ratnim zločincima ali isto tako zbog drugačije ekonomske situacije u zemlji. Pomirena južnoafrička žrtva dovršava revolucionarnu borbu. Bilo kakva potencijalna moralna pobjeda postignuta kroz process pomirenja u Bosni ne bi smjela zavisiti od materijalnog, ekonomskog ili pravosudnog zadovoljenja pravde.

Abstract

This paper is a philosophical reflection on matters of witnessing atrocity, genocide and reconciliation, arising from a conference on reconciliation and human rights held in Sarajevo. Taking a poster on the massacre of Srebrenica in 1995 as its cue, and using the work of Lacan and Althusser in relation to identification, the paper examines those who may be addressed by such a poster. In particular, it considers the humanity implicit in 'crime against humanity', the witness of atrocity, testimony and the death drive, the ethics of spectatorship, and the reconciled victim. In South Africa, the reconciled victim gained a moral victory at the cost of pursuing material (economic) justice. In Bosnia, the situation differs, partly because war crimes are being prosecuted, but also because the country's economic situation is different. The South African reconciled victim relinquishes revolutionary struggle. Any potential moral victory gained through Bosnian reconciliation need not compromise on matters of material, economic and criminal justice.

Introduction

During the month of summer, ten years later, in a town nestled among picturesque hills, a conference on reconciliation and human rights was held.¹ Outsiders fly in, inspecting the pock-marked facades of buildings, searching people's faces for traces of something awful. We know, by intimation, description, and text that terrible things happened not so long ago in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet the town itself is exquisite. Flanked by hills, like a cupped hand, Sarajevo is somewhat of a crucible; a curved receptacle subjected to a four-year-long experiment in which the accumulation of molten metals was combined with a slow and sustained attack designed to eliminate a valuable, trace element—human being.

That experiment failed, though some would say a degree of military success was achieved in respect of areas that now form part of Republica Srpska.² Others feel dispossessed from Sarajevo, that they must identify as Bosnian Serb, a qualification upon a hegemonic term that, taken alone (Bosnian, Bosniak), excludes them. Others mourn the fate of multicultural difference, or further still, assert the radical difference of singularity, refusing the imperatives of ethnic identification. Not everyone accepts the essentialism of categorical identity, or more precisely, the ways in which ethnic identity has figured within national politics.

The following discussion arises from that conference, that town and its history. Although Adorno famously stated that, after Auschwitz, poetry is barbarism, he did not mean to suggest that we remain silent in the face of genocide. One of the consequences of atrocity is that 'we' is broken up into antithetical components. In what follows, I explore a number of those distinctions: the 'we' of humanity, the victim of war crimes, the witness, the spectator, and the reconciled victim. These are not fixed subject positions but historical differentiations that depend upon historical circumstance: in this case, the circumstance of Sarajevo and its surrounds.

1. The Form of a Dress

I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality ...

Jacques Lacan³

According to Jacques Lacan, the infant develops a sense of identity through recognizing itself as a self in the mirror. He calls this the 'mirror-stage'. The coherence of identity—represented by the image in the mirror—is both potent and illusory, real and distorted, because the infant is not as unified as its reflected image would suggest. Lacan's term for the infant's actual bodily status is the *corps morcelé*, a body in bits and pieces. Bosnia is now in bits and pieces, broken up into states, regions, and cantons. People's identity is also broken up. Some would say it was ever thus, that Bosnia was 'always already' conflict ridden, that the peace of multicultural difference, past or future, is a nostalgic illusion.⁴

On what basis can the horizon of the future be discerned? Can coherence be achieved through a body in bits and pieces? Or is the mirror now broken?

In Sarajevo, a series of large wall posters, by way of commemoration, lines the streets—an article of clothing taken from Srebrenica is photographed and identified: in this case, a pair of Diesel jeans, tarnished in disturbing ways. Its brand name somehow extends the reference of horror beyond the confines of this former socialist country, for don't we all wear Diesel? Or if we don't, we know someone who does, who did, who died, who did die.



Cultural theorists have, over the years, attributed to the image something like the identificatory powers of Lacan's mirror. Drawing on Althusser's elaboration of Lacan, they argue that subjects identify through images, that they find themselves 'addressed' by the image, unconsciously taking on its implicit qualities as part of their identity. As agents of reflection and identity, images have inscribed within them particular forms of address, and viewers of images are spoken to through these forms of address. Although Althusser suggested that this process occurs beyond history — at the level of an ahistorical unconscious — others see it as very much subject to historical articulation. They argue that people bring their own histories to the image; that all are affected by what they see, but not necessarily in the same way.⁵

The historical understanding of identity formation argues that Althusser's use of the mirror stage attributes to identification a coherence it does not possess; that forms of address, and their subsequent modes of identification, participate in historically contested and troubled transactions. Thus might we ask who is addressed by this poster, without assuming everyone is addressed in the same way, acknowledging that history has differentiated among us who might gaze upon such a mirror and how. While this poster refers to Srebrenica, it has a certain uncanny ambiguity. It could be an advertisement, a globalized brand, but

for its disruption through the spectacle of horror. What forms of address, then, can such a poster provoke?

The world is addressed by genocide, recognized since the Jewish Holocaust, and now understood as a crime against humanity.⁶ Hence, the world, formally – via institutions and articles of international co-operation, enforcement and prosecution – opposes genocide. Universal declarations nevertheless require translation into the idiom of the situation. And translation is an art, requiring the creative adaptation of vernacular.

In its apparent adherence to the conventions of commercial image-making, the poster evokes the many international bodies and perspectives taken towards Bosnia, at the same time disrupting those conventions through its foregrounding an item of unutterable singularity. Despite its generic brand, Diesel, the piece of clothing, LZ-2B-48, belonged to a single person. According to forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, clothes formed a nexus of identification with the memories of the women of Srebrenica:

... they could recognize their own stitches, could describe the type of mending they did and what material they used, and where exactly they made the mends.⁷

She writes of the felt tension between the norms of forensic protocol (international, universal) and ethical feelings of obligation (embodied, particular):

I was touching the bones of someone whose family was out there and wanted more than anything to have him back, no matter what condition he was in, and yet I was the only one holding him. I felt like I was betraying him or his mother – I couldn't work out which.⁸

If the Jewish Holocaust is the paradigm, the measure, for all forms of genocide⁹, it has been argued that the (sexual) difference of Bosnian genocide found recognition in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's decision to treat rape as a specific crime against humanity.¹⁰ Debra Bergoffen claims that the ICTY's ability to focus on the sexual specificity of rape transformed the notion of humanity associated with genocide:

In declaring a male soldier's rape of a civilian woman a crime against humanity, the court's ruling brings the realities of sex and gender to the idea of the human. *It determines that it is in her particularity as a raped woman that an embodied sexed being can represent the human in its universality.*¹¹ (my emphasis)

For Bergoffen, this is not an inversion of the usual state of affairs in which male stands for the whole of humanity (i.e. not now a case of female=humanity) but is rather an acknowledgment of sexual differentiation within the concept of humanity. Thus, the world may be addressed by genocide but there are particulars, people differentiated within the whole, who can nevertheless represent humanity in its universality.

These are the dead and living, those who are singled out by this poster; not the generic 'humanity', but those against whom war crimes have been committed. Young men who were out of town at the time, perhaps at university elsewhere;

Muslim women and children who were not killed, though they may have been raped and tortured; former prisoners from other concentration camps around Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo; survivors from killings around the country. But especially those who didn't survive—the owner of this pair of jeans.

Czech inmate, Filip Muller, stood at the doors of Auschwitz, tempted to enter the abyss alongside his fellow Jews.¹² To resist the camaraderie of the dead meant carrying the burden of the living, to speak out on behalf of the dead. Testimony is required in all sorts of formal contexts. It is needed for the prosecution of war crimes. It is requisite in matters of truth and reconciliation. The witness of Srebrenica's massacre, if he or she has aged at all, is ten years older.

Time does not pass in a linear fashion, however. As Freud recognized through the notion of the death drive, pleasure is not the only driving force.¹³ The compulsion to repeat can occur in relation to trauma as well as pleasure. In other words, people dwell upon disturbance. It is not so easy to wash one's hands of negative feeling, nor does becoming aware of a problem guarantee its solution. Giving testimony, therefore, may not necessarily provide release for the subject of trauma. It would be naive to think that bearing witness to atrocity brings closure, that speaking brings things to an end. People speak out for many reasons, for justice, for the dead, to prove what occurred, to bring about change, not necessarily in order to feel better. Primo Levi did not feel better.

2. Fascination and the Ethics of Spectatorship

The line between spectatorship and voyeurism is very fine, and both contain an erotic attachment to the object being viewed. Neither the spectatorial nor the voyeuristic position is one of equitable exchange between the viewer and the viewed object, and the power of the active gaze rests with the viewer.

Anne Cubilié¹⁴

The testimony of the witness is an imperative, a first-person account uttered on behalf of many others who, by reason of death, can no longer speak. What Cubilié draws our attention to is the morbid fascination of the spectator according to which the witness becomes an object of erotic investment. How does the spectator approach the abyss of another's terror? What ethical relations are generated between the one who speaks and those who listen? It might be suggested that the courtroom, commission or tribunal has no time for these reflections; that the court works on behalf of, and in the interests of, the witness and justice. On the other hand, in cases of rape and child sexual abuse, criminal law courts have acknowledged the need to protect victims acting as witnesses so as to minimize *further* damage arising through the process itself.

Members of the court and its secretariat have representative functions in relation to justice, truth, documentation and prosecution. Through fulfilling judicial roles, their bodies are in a sense abstracted. By not performing such a function, the spectator is *in excess* of the demands of the situation. His or her corporeal response to the experience of spectatorship engages in libidinous relations with its object (the witness); whether relations of fascination, compassion, fear, indifference or terror. By being in excess of the situation, the spectator also

actively enters the situation, creating an ethical relationship between seer and seen. Put simply, people who watch others place their suffering on display are participants in the event, and are therefore ethically implicated. The ethical implication of the observer is enhanced by the fact that, in Cubilié's view, the gaze embodies certain powers with respect to its object. Hence, the observer occupies a position of privilege.

It is not clear to what extent this applies to, or is disavowed by, conferences that are unbound by legal protocol and serve no legal function. The *Pathways to Reconciliation and Human Rights* conference had academic and practical aims. Held in partnership with the United National Development Program in BiH, the organizers hoped to stage an international event in a specific location, which would contribute positively to networks of dialogue and reconciliation within and beyond Bosnia. It is in this context that two sessions were held on personal testimony and reconciliation. To what extent are conference participants who listen spectators in Cubilié's sense of the term?

One of the panel speakers, Kemal Pervanic, obliquely acknowledged the desire of his audience by raising the question of detail. What degree of detail should he offer in accounting for his time in the Omarska concentration camp? What would be enough? Enough for whom? Other panel members were visibly challenged by the burden of speaking in front of an audience of strangers and friends. My question would be: in staging such events, how is it possible to generate conditions of visibility for people giving testimony that shift the balance of power relations of self-representation towards the speakers themselves?¹⁵ Is it possible to conceive of a performance that does not rob the performer of his/her agency? I think it is, depending on the context and conditions of performative articulation. The ethical relation arises as an obligation on the part of the spectator to ensure that the desire of the witness is sufficiently accounted for, particularly in relation to the embodied experience of violence.¹⁶ This is especially so if we hold no illusions that giving testimony is, of itself, therapeutic.

3. Restitution: Moral Victory Versus Material Justice

In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Immanuel Kant explicated 'radical evil' as a choice made by man, a determination of human free will.¹⁷ As difficult as it is to imagine the human commission of evil, Bosnian refugees may well be returning to the scene of war crimes, to the place of radical evil. What are the conditions of their doing so? What forms of justice are required to facilitate their return? Many people have expressed frustration at the slow process of war criminal prosecution in former Yugoslavia, the inadequacy of sentencing and the vested interests that continue to shelter indicted war criminals still at large.¹⁸ Given that so many Nazi war criminals have, over sixty years, evaded capture and prosecution, what is the relation between reconciliation and justice, and in what order should it be pursued? A number of positions have been taken regarding the problem of justice *versus* reconciliation—that justice must precede reconciliation; conversely, that reconciliation must begin in spite of the slow pace of justice; or that reconciliation is itself a form of justice.

Robert Meister has looked at reconciliation in South Africa.¹⁹ For Meister, the reconciled victim of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was granted a moral victory, whose fruits include the consensus that the past was evil. In Meister's analysis, the reconciled victim is contrasted with the *unreconciled* victim, who maintains ongoing struggle against an evil that persists. The question of persistence in the South African context concerns the legacy of apartheid – do passive beneficiaries of apartheid continue its evil through enjoying its legacy or is evil past because apartheid is over? If evil is over, then the beneficiaries of apartheid get to keep their gains. The reconciled victim has a moral but not a material victory.

How would the prospect of a moral victory in Bosnia sit with what Meister calls the question of 'material justice'?²⁰ Given that mechanisms exist by which to prosecute war criminals in and beyond Bosnia, reconciliation does not propose itself as a substitute for justice achieved through prosecution.²¹ However, the notion of material justice lies beyond the logic of sentencing. It concerns the material conditions under which people live. International aid agencies have long been criticized for the western ethnocentrism implicit in development strategies aimed to allow societies to 'catch up' with the west. In recent years, however, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has moved towards a human-rights based understanding of its work. This signifies a shift away from teleological models of modernization and development towards another kind of benchmark.

In the context of Bosnia, this has been articulated in relation to poverty reduction, infrastructure, good governance and housing reconstruction. While universalist discourse can impose itself on the particular through effacing the needs of particularities, it is also possible to 'disaggregate' homogeneous categories.²² Vince Gamberale (Community, Habitat and Finance International) and Amela Malićbegović (REZ Regional Development Agency, Zenica) have both spoken of ways in which the singularity of individuals and their situation can be addressed via equitable forms of project management.²³ Ms Malicbegovic described the distribution of numerous grants in response to the diverse, practical imagination of regional inhabitants. These included fashion design, youth web design and snail farming. In both cases, a certain degree of municipal co-operation was requisite for the distribution of material support.

Is it possible to regard these initiatives as engaging in the pursuit of what Meister calls material justice – that which a truth and reconciliation commission may not furnish? To do so is to extend the notion of justice beyond its legal conception, towards a *modus vivendi* for those who have lived through the human commission of evil. The notion of material justice concerns not simply the right of return, but the material conditions in which return may be staged. While housing restoration, job creation, public accountability, good governance and the creation of infrastructure do not appear to perform the work of reconciliation, there is a sense in which they are a necessary adjunct in its pursuit.

What the material gains of development work cannot achieve is what Meister calls the moral victory that victims of torture and atrocity achieve through reconciliation; a 'moral triumph over pain' whereby 'revealing the truth about

pain, they achieve a partial victory over evil'.²⁴ While the moral victory of reconciliation delegitimizes the 'rationale' of the war criminal and produces a certain kind of consensus that the past was evil, it cannot guarantee that evil is forever past. To that extent, it behoves us to address the future in ways that foreclose the possibility of its repetition or worse. Material justice is one means towards that end.

Notes

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Endnotes

¹ *Pathways to Reconciliation and Global Human Rights*, Sarajevo, 16–19 August 2005.

² These include Banja Luka, Prijedor, Srebrenica and Zepa.

³ J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Sheridan, A. Tavistock Publications, London, 1977, p. 4.

⁴ The term 'always already' is used by theorists to suggest the sense in which a process occurs automatically with respect to individuals, that it does not develop gradually over time but is operative wherever you find individuals. Althusser used the notion of the always already to suggest that the process of subject formation (becoming a subject) occurs outside of history, is already pertinent for all subjects. Some historians (for example, E.P. Thompson) have taken exception to the notion that important aspects of human determination are, as it were, outside of history. The issue regarding the 'always already' in this context concerns the position that Bosnia embodies irreconcilable differences, that history can never erase these differences, that Bosnia is 'always already' liable to bitter forms of conflict.

⁵ David Morley distinguishes between the general sense in which the subject-text relation is formed, and the fact that 'subjects have histories', in 'Texts, Readers, Subjects', in S. Hall et al., eds, *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972–79*, Hutchinson, London, 1980, p. 166. This fact implies that the relationship between image and viewer is not singular but depends on the life history of the person viewing the image.

⁶ Cf United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, *Adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948*.

⁷ C. Koff, *The Bone Woman*, Hodder Books, Sydney, 2004, p. 178.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.180.

⁹ Peter Dews discusses the sense in which Alain Badiou has taken the position

that the Jewish holocaust serves as the singular measure of radical evil, P. Dews, 'Disenchantment and the Persistence of Evil', in A.D Schrift, ed., *Modernity and the Problem of Evil*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, p. 60.

¹⁰ Debra Bergoffen details the ways in which genocidal rape was recognized in the court's finding of guilt against Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic as a specific type of crime against humanity, D. Bergoffen, 'How Rape Became a Crime against Humanity: History of an Error', in A.D. Schrift, ed., *Modernity and the Problem of Evil*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp. 66–80. Bergoffen traces the shift from seeing rape as a collateral evil of war (included in the general category of torture, requiring *additional* proof of violence), towards its acknowledgement as a specific strategy aimed at simultaneously inscribing power on the bodies of Muslim women, while threatening the Bosnian Muslim men's subjectivities through the spectacle of these acts.

¹¹ D. Bergoffen, 'How Rape Became a Crime against Humanity: History of an Error', p. 71.

¹² Muller was interviewed in Claude Lanzmann's documentary film, *Shoah* (1985).

¹³ S. Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *Sigmund Freud: The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 218–68.

¹⁴ A. Cubilié, *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2005, p. 203.

¹⁵ See also A. Farrell and P. McDermott, 'Claiming Afghan Women: The Challenge of Human Rights Discourse for Transnational Feminism', in W. Hesford and W. Kozol, eds, *Just Advocacy? Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms and the Politics of Representation*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2005, pp. 33–55.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Damian Grenfell for this latter turn of phrase.

¹⁷ I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. Greene and H. Hudson, Harper and Rowe, New York, 1960. Kant's work has generated divergent responses, some of which want to remain within Kant's humanist (read, secular) reading of radical evil, others that take the view that radical evil can only be understood in theological terms. A related question concerns the person who has committed forms of atrocity. Kant wanted to retain the free will of evil-doers, to resist the portrayal of the monster as a person acting outside of rationality. This was also a concern for Arendt, how to represent the Nazi, Eichmann.

¹⁸ For example, Paddy Ashdown, reported in <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/yugo/article/0,2763,1375710,00.html>>, accessed 16 November 2005.

¹⁹ R. Meister, 'Ways of Winning, The Costs of Moral Victory in Transitional Regimes', pp. 81–111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²¹ Most prosecutions to date have been conducted at the ICTY in the Netherlands. This is no longer the case. At a conference held by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in Sarajevo, on 10 November 2005, the Chief Prosecutor of the ICTY, Carla del Ponte, issued a press release that lauded the inauguration of the War Crimes Chamber of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established in 2004. While the transfer of cases from the ICTY to the BiH court is complicated, the Bosnian court is now able to conduct cases of its own motion, by way of national (not international) jurisdiction.

²² Stefan Priesner, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in BiH, spoke of 'disaggregating data' at the *Pathways to Reconciliation and Human Rights* conference. The significance of such a term lies in its recognition that statistical categories embody internal differences; that the social field may be broken up somewhat differently to the suppositions of empirical data gathering. Disaggregation is crucial if attention is to be paid to the specificities of the social field. It is a means of combating the standardization of human rights.

²³ At the *Pathways to Reconciliation and Human Rights* conference.

²⁴ R. Meister, 'Ways of Winning, The Costs of Moral Victory in Transitional Regimes', p. 101.