

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN TENGIZ ABULADZE'S *REPENTANCE*¹

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Abstract:

This paper examines three dimensions of symbolic violence within a totalitarian state (the elimination of individuality, the preclusion of a sense of community, and the disappearance of the boundary between oppressor and oppressed), which can be identified in two historical cases, the Nazi concentration camp and the Pitești experiment, as well as in the 1984 Georgian film *Repentance* by Tengiz Abuladze.

Keywords: *Symbolic violence, the Lager, political persecution, the Pitești experiment, the film Repentance*

In his essay entitled “The Gray Zone”, Primo Levi draws attention to the fact that “[a]nyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the Lager, reveals the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ’s gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates.” (83)

As the author himself explains in pursuing his analysis of Nazi concentration camps, this perspective on the inner workings of the Lager, though satisfying the demand for clarity which characterizes the way in which especially younger generations view history, has the effect of oversimplifying our consideration of the past. Thus, instead of a good-bad binary corresponding to the relationship between prisoners and their persecutors, Levi proposes the

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recognition of a “gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge” (85), and in so doing focuses his analysis on a class of privileged prisoners who, in exchange for extra nourishment and other gains, oppressed the other prisoners while they themselves continued to suffer the violence of the SS officers.

Although Levi confines his essay to a study of the Nazi concentration camps, I believe that his rejection of the traditional binary view on the social dynamics within the Lager can be applied to an examination of physical and symbolic violence in other historical contexts. Indeed, in his essay “Identity-Raping Practices: Semicolonialism, Communist Reeducation and Peer Torture”, Radu Surdulescu observes the same elimination of a clear boundary between oppressor and oppressed in what has come to be known as the Pitești experiment, which reflected the violence inherent in the Romanian Communist regime (strongly influenced by Moscow) between 1949 and 1952, when it was forbidden to send information about the experiment to the Western world. The Pitești experiment was a “reeducation-through-torture project” (68) that relied on permanent physical and symbolic (words, gestures etc.) violence towards inmates. The guards subjected a group of detainees to this kind of treatment until they lost all sense of individuality and no longer knew who they were socially, professionally and spiritually. After they were recognized as “reeducated” (or as Surdulescu suggests, “eradicated”), they were urged to apply the same treatment to their cellmates, until they became reeducated themselves.

Intrinsic in both Primo Levi’s and Radu Surdulescu’s examples are two factors inextricably linked to the deconstruction of the apparent divide between victims and perpetrators. Firstly, the unavoidable moral collapse suffered by the person who was met with unexpected aggression from the other prisoners, instead of their help and support, was connected to the objective of eliminating individualism, especially in the form of dissent. While in the case of the Lagers this aim mostly had a pragmatic function, as the prisoners’ submission required the eradication of any “example or [...] germ of organized resistance” (Levi 83), in the case of the Pitești experiment, this goal had an ideological base as well, reflecting the stated plan of the political apparatus, namely “to create a new man, with a new psychological and social identity” (Surdulescu, “Identity-Raping” 69). Secondly, a result of the disappearing difference between oppressor and oppressed was the preclusion of any form of community, as “all the subjects [...] became [to a certain extent] isolated entities (78). Thus, what the two examples under discussion demonstrate is that beyond the physical violence inherent in the Pitești experiment and the Nazi Lager, the most effective way of subduing the individual was provided by symbolic violence, which Radu Surdulescu defines as “that kind of non-physical violence expressed through words or other sign systems” (“Introduction” 11). Therefore, the signifying value of symbolic violence, as shown by these two cases, was manifested through the disruption of

the clear opposition between victims and persecutors. Instead of the expected paradigm ("us" versus "them"), the prisoners were confronted with an unanticipated system in which the known signs of the struggle (friends and enemies) were subverted, and it is in relationship to this dimension of symbolic violence that the eradication of individuality and the exclusion of any sense of community occurred.

In what follows, I will steer my analysis away from these two historical cases to Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze's 1984 film *Repentance*, in which I will identify the previously mentioned three interconnected aspects of symbolic violence: the loss of individualism, the undermining of any sense of communitarian harmony, and the elimination of the boundary between oppressor and oppressed. Yet, before this link between history and film can be drawn, it is necessary to briefly outline the events that *Repentance* portrays.

The film begins with the news of Varlam Aravidze's (Avtandil Makharadze) death, an old and respected member of a town's community. To everyone's shock, however, after a mournful and somewhat sumptuous funeral, his body is thrice exhumed from his grave in the middle of the night, until the perpetrator of this crime is apprehended. Identified as Keto Barateli (Zeinab Botsvadze), the woman, now in police custody, explains the reasons for her actions during her trial, thus having to remember and recount what her family and the entire town experienced decades before, during a period when Varlam filled the position of mayor. The beginning of her story marks a disruption of the film's narrative flow as its two aspects, *histoire* (the chronological order of events) and *récit* (the order in which they are portrayed in this movie) cease to overlap: her retelling of those events brings the *mise-en-scène* back into the temporal sphere of her childhood, and into a period during which Varlam Aravidze enjoyed his complete dominance over the townsmen. The negative effects of his rule are only hinted at on the occasion of his inaugural speech, when Aravidze appears for the first time in the film donning, as Anne Kieffer has observed in *Le Dictionnaire des Films* (Larousse), Mussolini's black shirt, Hitler's small moustache, Stalin's seemingly benevolent nature and Beria's glasses and thus appears to be a hybrid between these four dictators (qtd. in "Покаяние"). Nevertheless, as the narrative unfolds, Aravidze consolidates his position by suppressing dissent in all its forms (political, artistic, individual, and collective), his long line of attacks against his constituents culminating with the mass deportation and eventual murder of a large number of people.

In terms of the three dimensions of symbolic violence under discussion, Varlam sustains his dominance firstly, through the elimination of any kind of individualism among the inhabitants of the town. This eradication of individuality is a consequence of his systematic suppression of personal freedom: as his tyranny gains momentum, it is no longer a person or a small group of people (whose identities can be clearly distinguished from those of

others) who are sent to prison, but a mass of people whose names remain unknown both to Aravidze and to the viewer. For example, one of the first things that Varlam does after coming to power is arrest two elderly people, Miriam and Mosse who had protested against his use of an old church as a facility for housing a scientific laboratory. Later, Aravidze also imprisons Sandro Barateli (Edisher Giorgobiani), Keto's father, whose solidarity with the two senior citizens, and, in general, his independence of thought had posed a threat to Varlam's vision of the town as "Paradise." As these examples imply, Aravidze's initial attack is upon individuals whose identities and stance are well known both to himself and to the spectator, but as the action of the film progresses, Varlam orders the arrest of a multitude of people, the motivation for which (if there is any) cannot be traced to a specific cause or name. In this sense, one can draw on Primo Levi's observation in his essay "The Gray Zone", in which he recounts a unique event that occurred at Auschwitz: a so-called "Special Squad", consisting of the prisoners charged with the task of removing and then incinerating the bodies of those who had died in the gas chambers, once found a young woman who was still alive, which disrupted their horrific routine. "Death is their trade at all hours, death is a habit" and, therefore, as "[t]here is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused", "a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows" (90). Similarly, the gathering of people into a homogenous mass performed by Aravidze works to underscore his complete disregard for human life or, in Hannah Arendt's words, the "banality of evil" that informs his rule ("From Eichmann" 100).

This indiscriminate destruction of human life by a higher, official authority is also reminiscent of Michel Foucault's view on what he calls "bio-power". In his essay "Right of Death and Power over Life", the author explains that, before the classical age, the sovereign exercised his power through his ability to take the life of the people who threatened his position. In other words, his power "was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself". Since the classical age, however, the state has exercised its power by administering life, by "generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than [...] impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (79). Foucault's point is that the blatant paradox of such a paradigm shift is that the destruction of human life (often taking the form of genocide) is no longer implemented in order to protect the authority of a sovereign but in order to ensure the preservation of "entire populations" (80). The same paradox is evident in the apparent incompatibility that exists between Aravidze's actions and the discourse which he uses in order to justify them. During the same conversation he had with Sandro concerning the fate of the old church, Varlam subtly remarks that while he was giving his inaugural speech or, as he puts it, while he was "fighting the enemies of the people", little Keto was

blowing soap bubbles out the window. The disproportionately negative significance he places on the girl's innocent play while presenting himself as defender of his people, coupled with the subsequent atrocities that he inflicts on the townsmen, exposes the hypocrisy behind his apparently positive language. This contrast between the words themselves and their actual meaning is also indicative of the danger inherent in totalitarian propaganda, whose seemingly benign tone works to conceal the violence that the regime inflicts on its people, and thus, to discourage any concerted dissent, which would otherwise be immediate. This disguise of state brutality can also be related to what Nancy Scheper-Hughes, in her essay "Bodies, Death and Silence", defines as the "disappeared", or "the missing, lost, disappeared, or otherwise out-of-place bodies" (175) as a consequence of state action and negligence. Her observations suggest that the word "disappeared" can be read both in its proper sense, i.e. signifying a person who is missing, but also, and more importantly, as a verb in the passive voice describing an individual whose kidnapping, torture and murder by the instruments of the state have been covered up and replaced with the claim of an unknown cause or accident.

Moreover, while at the beginning criticism of his actions does have an effect (an example in this sense being provided by Sandro's intervention, which leads to the release of the two elderly people that Varlam had unfairly arrested) and he does present a semblance of proof, such as the spurious document anonymously signed by "a group of artists" and accusing Sandro of being "an enemy of the people", later Varlam's arrests take on an absurd dimension as there is no logical motivation for them. During one of his speeches, he demonstrates a paranoid distrust of everyone and urges his listeners to be "vigilant"; Varlam goes so far as to quote Confucius in saying that "it is hard to catch a black cat in a dark room, especially if there is no cat" and subsequently resolves that "if we want it very much, we will catch a black cat in a dark room, even if there is no cat."

As the previous examples suggest, besides Aravidze himself, the central figure in these events is Sandro Barateli, whose privileged position in the narrative is evidently motivated by his relationship to Keto, the narrator of this story, but also by the fact that the suppression of his individualism is of a more complex nature. Not only does it take the form of an attack on his personal freedom, when he is eventually imprisoned, but also of an attempt to employ his artistic talent to support the official ideology and, following his refusal to comply with Aravidze's propagandistic notion of art as mirroring "the great reality", of a confiscation of his work. The oppression suffered by the Barateli family is also conveyed on a symbolic level through a dream that Nino (Ketevan Abuladze), Keto's mother, has, in which she and Sandro are followed by Varlam and his aides everywhere they go, including in the most unlikely of places (from narrow streets to open fields) and which ends with them buried from the neck

down into the ground. However, this dream, as well as Sandro's intervention in favor of the two elderly people apprehended by Aravidze and his refusal to sacrifice his art in the service of propaganda, represent only a few of the events that happen before Sandro's eventual arrest, which implies that Nino's dream is in fact an anticipation of their ultimate demise. This testifies to the psychological dimension of political persecution manifested not only as a logical consequence of one's physical imprisonment but also by one's perpetual fear of helplessly suffering this fate. In one scene, Nino (and other women whose husbands had been captured) and Keto arrive at a site where logs, supposedly carrying the signatures of the men now exiled, were ground into a machine and thus reduced to sawdust, an image representing a metaphor for the annihilation of the individual, both as a physical and as a spiritual entity.

In addition, as the pervasive symbolism of this film suggests, Sandro's suffering can be construed as standing for the plight of the entire community subjected to Aravidze's rule. This becomes evident in this character's stance in what concerns Varlam's housing of a scientific laboratory in "The Church of the Mother of God." For Sandro, as well as for the two senior citizens that Aravidze imprisons shortly after their complaint, this precious historical "monument of early Christianity", whose walls are already cracking due to the vibrations of the machinery inside, embodies as Sandro himself observes, "the life-giving roots that nourish and spiritually enrich" his community. Therefore, Sandro's arrest, together with the subsequent collapse of the church, are indicative of a more profound level of political persecution consisting in the destruction of religious faith and historical memory. The eradication of these two elements and their replacement with the values of scientific determinism point to the second dimension of symbolic violence that this essay discusses, namely the preclusion of any sense of community, as the church represents not only the spiritual nexus around which the town revolves but also its past. In this sense, the disappearance of this monument is meant to erase whatever had legitimized the collective identity of the town's population. Significantly, Aravidze refuses to salvage the church even when, during the conversation he has with Sandro and with the two senior citizens, he acknowledges the fact that Sandro and himself have a common ancestor. This notion emphasizes the idea that Varlam places much more importance on his plans for dominance and personal gain than on preserving the bond that exists between his constituents. In an interesting scene, an image of Sandro being tortured (whether Nino is experiencing a dream or "reality" is unclear) is juxtaposed to the collapse of the church as a result of Aravidze's order to blow it up. The correspondence between Sandro's role as a pillar of the community and the church itself is made evident by Nino's remark "We have lost our Father." Her words imply Sandro's significance as a father figure for Keto, but on a more profound level, they entail not only the significance of the church as a symbol for faith but also, in religious terms, the

notion that an exaggerated trust of human reason at the expense of spirituality brings about a break with the only force that can protect people against the horrific effects of their own actions. The symbolic value that Abuladze assigns to the church in his film can be connected to Gaston Bachelard's concept of "topophilia", which represents "the investigations" of "felicitous space", or

the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love. For diverse reasons, and with the differences entailed by poetic shadings, this is eulogized space. Attached to its protective value, which can be a positive one, are also imagined values, which soon become dominant. (xxxix-xxxii)

Thus, the "imagined values" related to the church exceed its pragmatic function: its "protective value" stems not only from the building itself, from the enclosed space which it designates and which can physically shelter people but also from the values of spirituality and historical memory that it represents.

Aravidze's strategy in completely subduing his constituents through the suppression of history and religious faith, and their replacement with the eternal present of communist dictatorship is reminiscent of E. Valentine Daniel's correspondence between "mood, moment, and mind" and Charles Pierce's categories of "Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness". As Daniel explains,

Firstness is the phenomenological category of the possible; Secondness is the category of the actual instantiations of certain possibilities; and Thirdness is the tendency of the universe – including humankind – to adopt and adapt to an evolving "lawfulness" among human beings and between humans and their environment. [...] In considering mood as a relative First, then, I think of its connotations of a state of feeling – usually vague, diffuse, and enduring, a disposition toward the world at any particular time yet with a timeless quality to it. [...] The "moment," like the category of Secondness under which I have presented it, entails a sense of unique fact or event, a here-and-nowness, a selective narrowing of possibilities to just one actuality. [...] "Mind" I bring under the covering category of Thirdness: the tendency to generalize, to reason, to take habit. (333-334)

Elsewhere, he adds that under the circumstances of a "presence of violence",

[w]hen the present looms large in this manner, both memory and hope become either emaciated or bloated. In either case, it is the present that determines the past, making the past a mere simulacrum of the present. The future, thanks to the capriciousness of the present, is uncertain and bleak. (336)

In the same way, the world envisaged by Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* is a portrayal of an "overburdening" present which excludes any possibility for memory, associated with the "feel of continuity" intrinsic in "mood", and for the hope that comes with reassessing (in the future) the present through the "mind." In other words, through the perpetuation of violence and of the uncertainty associated with it, the community depicted in the film undergoes the effect of a repetitive "moment" which excludes the possibility for a "mood" to develop itself and for the past to become a legitimizing, "coherent narrative" rather than "a mere simulacrum of the present" (336); moreover, as violence has no foreseeable end, a reconsideration of the past and of the present (the "mind") cannot exist, and therefore, the future cannot be a "coherent narrative" (336) either.

Conducive to this loss of communitarian harmony is also the elimination of the boundary between oppressors and oppressed. Firstly, Varlam and his aides do not represent an external force that imposes itself on the inhabitants of the town but are shown to have originated from its very population. Secondly, even if the two sides of the political divide were initially clearly defined, with Aravidze and his clique as the dominant group and the townsmen as the dominated entities, the distinction between these two camps disappears as Varlam orders the arrest of people who had supported him. In an ironic twist of events, Varlam's influence seems to be extreme as his aides begin to arrest people without having been told to do so, and actually resist Varlam's protests, telling Varlam that his authority is threatened. This can be connected to Michel Foucault's observation that power is not unified or centralized but appears in the form of a network "of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power" and which "are always local and unstable" (*The History* 334). Authority seems to emanate from Varlam but as he relies on a group of individuals to carry out his orders against a community which, of course, does not support him willingly and within which hostility against him may erupt at any time, power stems in fact from his unpredictable aides.

On a related note, Hannah Arendt's theory of the relationship between power and violence denounces the views of such political thinkers as C. Wright Mills and Max Weber, who perceive violence as necessary in maintaining the power of the state, and thus, who believe that "[a]ll politics is a struggle for power" and that "the ultimate kind of power is violence" (Mill qtd. in Arendt, *On Violence* 236). Contradicting this approach, Arendt draws a clear distinction between power, which she sees as relying on "the strength of opinion", on "numbers", and violence, which "up to a point can manage without them" because of "its instrumental character" (238-39), thus concluding that while "[v]iolence can destroy power, it is utterly incapable of creating it" (242). In the same way, Varlam's rule is evidently not based on the opinion of those he disposes of so quickly and unfairly, but on the violence he inflicts on them, until

this instrument loses its efficacy, and he himself is in danger of being undermined. As Radu Surdulescu explains, referring to her theory, “[in] totalitarian states, terror is established as a form of government when violence has remained in full control after the annihilation of power: the police state begins to devour its own children, executioners become victims in their turn.” (“Ethics” 43)

As Varlam Aravidze's dominance is not based on political power but on violence, he is faced with the danger of becoming a victim of the totalitarian regime that he has created. Therefore, although Varlam will never be formally held accountable for his crimes during his lifetime, his guilt will be acknowledged symbolically. Firstly, during a conversation he has with his grandson Tornike (Merab Ninidze) shortly before his death, when his mind has already started to drift, he sees blood trickling down his hands, which are in fact clean. He also says that he wants to “extinguish the sun” (that keeps “pestering” him and “prying into his soul”) which can be construed as a metaphor for an all-seeing higher authority, perhaps God, whom he has rejected through his disregard for the church that collapsed. More important, however, is the hereditary nature of his guilt. After Keto ends her testimony, Tornike accuses his father Abel (Varlam's son), of never having admitted to his father's culpability and for having thus perpetuated injustice. Abel, who is played by the same actor playing the role of Varlam, excuses his father by remarking that the times were “complicated.” Despite Tornike's anger at his attitude, he continues not to recognize the guilt that binds him and his family to Varlam's actions.

In another scene which marks the symbolism of the film, Abel climbs down in his cellar and looks at the paintings that Varlam had confiscated from Sandro decades before. It is in this underground space (remindful of the traditional vision of hell as a pit below earth) that he has an imaginary conversation with his father who, while talking to Abel, is eating an entire fish – a metaphor for his persecution of spirituality. The surreal meeting between Abel and Varlam appears as a confrontation. The former, although fearful about Keto's accusations and about his own son's hostility towards him, upholds his innocence, while the latter accuses him of hypocrisy and tells him that, despite his claims, he “will grind to dust anyone who stands in [his] way” and that his apparent soul-searching cannot be defined as a guilty conscience but as a result of a fear of loneliness, now that his own father “is thrown out of his grave”, that he is “losing his power” and that his “only son rebels against” him. The imaginary Varlam, standing for Abel's conscience, also reminds him that a lonely atheist “only thinks of death”, an idea which emphasizes the significance placed by the director of the film on spirituality. In a symbolic gesture, Tornike, no longer able to withstand the hypocrisy of his father, shoots himself with the rifle that his grandfather, Varlam, had given to him as a present, thus putting an

end to the hereditary transmission of guilt and repenting for the sins of his father and grandfather. Yet, the true significance of the title, “repentance”, becomes apparent in the long and desperate monologue that Abel has after this tragic event:

May your name be cursed, as your life and deeds, Abel Aravidze! What have you done! Monster! May your blood turn to water and your bread to dust! May your flesh burn in Hell’s fire and not be honored like your father with an earthly burial! Why were you born, devil incarnate, Abel Aravidze? And why was your father born? And your son? It’s grown so dark, it’s pitch dark. Oh, God, all this is so senseless!

This is followed by a scene in which Abel digs up his own father and throws him from the edge of a cliff, thus sealing his atonement.

Varlam’s guilt is also recognized externally, by factors which exceed his consciousness and family: the humorous introductory scene of the movie, during which his family and supporters pay their last respect at his wake, is suffused with theatricality as they blatantly pretend to mourn or extol Varlam. After the body is exhumed for a third time, Abel orders a group of his aides to stand guard at the grave during the night and wait for the criminal, but instead, both their commanding officer and Abel decide to have dinner in a friend’s house near the cemetery. Moreover, the remaining soldiers are not really keeping watch but are talking amongst themselves, drinking alcohol and even urinating in close vicinity of the grave, unknowingly leaving it to Tornike, who was hiding, to shoot and apprehend the criminal. What this hypocrisy suggests is that even people who present themselves as having truly loved and supported Varlam, are well aware that the former mayor’s value is not given by his inner qualities but by his position and by the fear he had inspired in his constituents, which can no longer have any effect. Of course, Varlam’s guilt is also acknowledged by Keto during her trial. In fact, the legal proceedings which surround her case represent the indirect trial of Varlam Aravidze and her rhetorical question (“So, who is Varlam Aravidze?”) at the beginning of the movie indicates to the viewer that the entire film presents the facts that incriminate the former mayor of the town.

Significantly, however, the film has an ambiguous ending which overthrows the apparent clarity of its sequence of events. Structured symmetrically, the movie’s final scene mirrors its initial one. In both of them, Keto bakes cakes shaped like churches (a metaphor for the reconstruction of faith in the community, which is in stark contrast with Varlam’s eating of the fish) and talks to one of Varlam’s former aides who mournfully comments his death. Given that, throughout the film, all that Keto does is to indict Varlam, the fact that the aide’s attitude is completely unchanged and that their conversation occurs under the exact circumstances, it is possible to conclude that the woman’s exhuming of the former ruler’s body, as well as her trial, were a mere figment of

her imagination, through which she was fantasizing about the vindication of her lost family. This is a troubling conclusion for the viewer, as it means that, in reality, the recognition of Varlam's crimes never happened. Extending the significance of this realization, one can argue that Abuladze's film explores the idea that dictators frequently escape formal trial (or that the sentence elicited by a formal trial could never match the extent of the damage he caused), although its religious symbolism attests to his belief that they are not exempt from God's judgment.

Focusing on the political value of the film, it is interesting to note that it presents multiple references to Communism: the scientific determinism shown as replacing religious faith, the repeated phrase "enemies of the people", the idea of a "beauty of the working-class" etc. Moreover, the film, made in 1984, was banned in Georgia until 1987, when it was released in the new context of Gorbachev's glasnost policy. However, there is a series of elements which point to the movie's potential for a broader interpretation. As mentioned before, judging by his appearance, Varlam represents a hybrid between four dictators, irrespective of their political ideology. This, together with the symbolic quality of *Repentance*, indicates that the film is an indictment of totalitarianism in general, and in this sense, has a universal, rather than a specific political undertone. The film's surrealist nature is also important in this respect because it adds a note of subtlety to it, which underscores its subversive potential.

Given the historical context in which the film was created, as well as its content, I believe that *Repentance* is testament to the value of art, particularly film, as an avenue of dissent from an established political discourse. It is for this reason that I have chosen to begin my essay with a presentation of two historical cases of political oppression and to relate them to an analysis of Abuladze's film. By identifying in *Repentance* three dimensions of symbolic violence present in the Nazi concentration camp and the Pitești experiment, I have shown the link between what we conceptualize as reality, on the one hand, and what we view as artistic creation, on the other. It is this porous boundary between the two ontological categories of fact and fiction that, I believe, allows us to recognize the profoundly ethical value of *Repentance*.

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