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The rising tensions between religion, eroticism and art: The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes a reflection on the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, which blends religious practice and erotic pleasure. Georges Bataille's assumption that eroticism and religiosity are complementary cultural constructions in search of overcoming the finitude and the discontinuity between human beings encompasses the presence of St. Sebastian in the contemporary art related to the photographic image. The implied cult of the Holy soldier's sensuality in Renaissance and baroque paintings turns into explicit appropriation in the homoerotic iconography of the 20th century, as we can see in the openly biographical translations of the theme in the performance pictures by Yukio Mishima and Luigi Ontani and in Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane*.

KEYWORDS: Eroticism. Religiosity. Saint Sebastian. Photography. Film.

From the point of view of photography, some of the themes addressed by art history that frequently derive from pictorial or sculptural tradition usually somewhat translate the iconographic system from which they come. According to many authors (Coleman, 2004; Rouillé, 2005; Fontcuberta, 2010; Mora, 2004), photography is a medium of expression full of ambiguities, for it finely articulates overlapping layers between reality and fiction in a play that renders inevitable the reinvention of the iconographic arrays that serve as its inspiration. The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian is one of such themes, and, upon being performed in the photographic image (or in film), reaffirms the status of this imagery system precisely because it adds autobiographical elements to the Christian myth, an aspect that places the relationships between religion, eroticism and artistic production in permanent tension.

The intersection between religiosity and eroticism is recurring in cultural manifestations ever since the later antiquity and art is no doubt one of its privileged places, especially in cultures whose religiosity make use of images. The very prehistoric origin of religions supports itself in the appreciation of the images as substitutes of the divinities or as expressions that ease human finitude (Débray, 1993), and such a situation promotes the blend of intrinsic relations between production, the development of religiosity and the notion of eroticism.

According to Georges Bataille, the origin of humanity is full of existential passages ranging from continuous to discontinuous and vice-versa. However, for Bataille, we are, in short, *discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure* (Bataille, 1987, 15p.) The discontinuity condition evokes the nostalgia of lost continuity and, as a result, engenders an obsession so much with what relates us to a duality of chance as well as with our perishable individuality. We need images in the same way that we try to supply the irreversibility of our individual condition through the sexual act. In this perspective, we “eroticize” everyday life as well as we “sacralize” our existence, because *the mystical experience, to the extent that we have within us the strength to operate a break from our discontinuance, introduces in us the feeling of continuity* (p. 22).

The primeval sense of the word “religion” comes from the Latin *religare* and brings the idea of reconstituting a spiritual bond between man and the incomprehensible and threatening forces of nature. In ancient religious practices, there is an proximity to the sense of eroticism as proposed by Bataille, in a movement that is similar to the manifested desire of most cultures in promoting “religious order” in face of the desecrate “disorder”. In the same way as the sexual act proposes a complementarity between human beings – regarding what we call eroticism as a fleeting symbiosis that destroys the condition of existential discontinuity –, religious ritualism generates a symbolic merge between mankind and the forces of nature supported in the construction of a delineated space for the practice of faith, which breaks with territorial discontinuity and impacts the whole community kept within its bounds. *For the profane experience, space is homogeneous and neutral: no disruption distinguishes the various parts of its mass in a qualitative manner* (Eliade, 1992, p. 18). In this way, the convergence between beings who embody the principle of erotic complementarity resembles the same logic of the religious ritual, because in both there is the desire of symbolic continuity. Be it in the other person, in the space set up for faith or in mystical experience that religion and eroticism can outline.

THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT SEBASTIAN

The erotic exuberance of ancient religious systems such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Pagan Greece and Rome, and overall India is not easily found in the Christian universe, which rarely features religious images linked to the representation of eroticism, albeit such images having become part of the Western artistic production due to the

Renaissance humanism, in a context that reviewed the standards of body representation, conforming to the ideal model influenced by the ancient classical world. The representation of The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian fits in this category for its frequency in the Renaissance, a period in which Paganism not only contaminated the interest of artists for Greco-Roman mythology themes but also provided references for the representation of Christian liturgy aspects. From this perspective, it follows to think of the aforementioned saint's religious iconography as well as of his different historical appropriations, including the view of the saint as a religious icon that adheres to the homo-erotic cultural universe, especially in contemporary times.

San Sebastian lived in the 3rd century and, as a soldier, was so admired by the joint emperors Diocletian and Maximian that they made him commander of the first cohort (Infantry Legion). However, Sebastian would have worn the military uniform with the sole intention of strengthening the hearts of Christians, increasingly weakened by the persecutions (Varazze, 2003, p. 177). The reports indicate that the soldier engaged frequently in the defense of Christians, mediating miracles related to curing diseases, including the Pagans', who converted to Christianity to show gratitude. Among these miracles is the cure of a mayor of Rome, leading to his conversion to the Christian faith. Actions such as these brought him great respect from his followers, as well as assured him considerable fame in the Roman world. However, Sebastian's Christian grace was not well received in an officially and mostly pagan Rome.

When his Christianity was denounced to Diocletian, Sebastian was regarded as a traitor and thus condemned to martyrdom. He was then taken to a field, tied to a tree, and perforated with arrows until his death by a group of archers. The situation gave way to his resurrection. Some references in art history complement the unfoldings of his story through the character of Irene, who healed the soldier's wounds, allowing his return to Rome to defend his religious beliefs, which in its turn evoked once again the emperors' wrath. These facts contributed to the emperor having him bludgeoned to death. His body was thrown into the common sewer and subsequently buried in the catacombs of Rome, where he now remains in his sepulcher.

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian was widely represented throughout the European Renaissance by artists the likes of Hans Memling, Antonello da Messina, Giovanni Bellini, Sandro Botticelli, Albert Dürer, etc. The recurrence of the Saint's semi-nakedness buxom and androgynous representation ever since the 14th century was tolerated by the Church because of the influence of the

Classical antiquity and also for the fact that Saint Sebastian was the patron of the plague because the arrows shot at him symbolize the conquer of death. However, after the Catholic Revival, the Church soon replaced Saint Sebastian by Saint Roch, who was taken to be much more decent and wiser in the task of protecting from pestilence (Darrulat, 1998).

In any case, the representations and the devotion to the Saint were maintained during the Baroque period, when Saint Sebastian's image seemed to be established as *glorious*. This image evidenced the ambiguity of the Saint's gender, as well as the strong eroticization of his figure throughout different versions of it – especially the ones by Guido Reni. It was also during the Baroque and the emphasis given to dramatization during that period that several images of St. Sebastian were done in a more languid fashion, accentuating the increasingly reticent sense of the iconography, as in paintings by Jusepe de Ribera, Mattia Preti and Antonio de Bellis, or in sculptures by Pierre Puget, Antonio Giorgetti and Johann Michael Feichtmayer.

According to Fernandez (*op. cit.*), the poem *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien* (The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian), with a text written in 1911 by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) and incidental music by Claude Debussy, was responsible for the start of an open homoerotic devotion to the Diocletian guard. The Italian poet wrote the text in French and built a mythical Sebastian who refused to be treated with clemency and asked the executioners to torture him during his capital punishment. D'Annunzio's poetic speech is more or less a love song that stresses the determination and religious convictions of the saint as a symbol of resistance:

Archers, / Archers, if ever you loved me, / let me know your love / again in your arrows! I tell you, I tell you: / the one who wounds me / the most deeply loves me / the most deeply! (D'Annunzio *apud* Fernandez, 2001, p. 103).

D'Annunzio's poem proposes an intrinsic relationship between suffering and ecstasy in the history of San Sebastian, and this view was inspired by the saint's artistic representation, in paintings and sculptures, that emphasize this recurrent condition in Christian iconography as a whole. A similar example is the many times that John the Baptist was represented naked, with strong sexual appeal, an aspect that made him a homo-erotic icon as well. The history of St. John – beheaded by orders of his beloved, vengeful Salome – is a clue that awakens the ambiguous sense of his martyrdom, linked as much to the suffering by female treachery as to redemption, both elements that bring him closer to the

homo-erotic imagery and its intrinsic melancholy, anchored in the relationship between Eros and Thanatos.

There are many Christian images that bring us the pain and pleasure binomial. In this respect, Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-52) is an ideal example of the underlying relationship between pain and pleasure. An Angel plunged a golden spear several times into the heart of St. Teresa of Avila, who described her experience and the sensation it elicited: "*The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God*" (apud Bell, 2008, p. 239-241). The central sculptural group in white marble set at Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome displays drive between life and death, eroticism and religiosity. Just like in the images of St. Sebastian, the representations of St. John the Baptist and St. Teresa evoke the suffering motivated by a noble cause: surrender to the divine love without concessions, even if such an option tended towards death. The aforementioned might not be as noticeable in St. John the Baptist's representations as in those of St. Sebastian and St. Teresa, in which the connotation of suffering related to the surrender to sex is evident. However, we can see the relationship between eroticism, violence and death in all three examples: *When the relationship of two lovers is the effect of passion, it calls on death, on the wish to commit murder or on suicide* (Bataille, 1987, p. 20).

The homo-erotic affinity with the theme of the Martyrdom of St Sebastian may be linked precisely to this overlap that exalts the physical vulnerability and the feeling of love. On the other hand, said affinity with St. Sebastian's martyrdom seems to have been there before Gabrielle D'Annunzio wrote his poem. The French monarch Louis XIII, a supporter of homoeroticism himself, had in his bedroom a painting by French painter Georges Latour of a half-naked St. Sebastian being taken care of by Irene (Fernandez, 2001, p. 91).

SAINT SEBASTIAN AS TRANSLATED THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Similar devotion to the Roman soldier was further established throughout the 20th century. An example that elucidates this affinity is in the memories of Japanese writer Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), first published in 1949 under the suggestive title "*Confessions of a Mask*". The excerpt in which Mishima describes his first encounter with the image of Saint Sebastian is particularly interesting as to the conditions of appropriation of this iconography by homo-erotic sensitivity:

I began turning a page toward the end of a volume. Suddenly there came into view from one corner of the next page a picture that I had to believe had been lying in wait there for me, for my sake. It was a reproduction of Guido Reni's "St. Sebastian," which hangs in the collection of the Palazzo Rosso at Genoa. [...] A remarkably handsome youth was bound naked to the trunk of the tree. [...] and the only covering for the youth's nakedness was a coarse white cloth knotted loosely about his loins. "I guessed it must be a depiction of a Christian martyrdom. But [...] even this painting of the death of a Christian saint has about it a strong flavor of paganism. The youth's body — it might even be likened to that of Antinous, beloved of Hadrian, whose beauty has been so often immortalized in sculpture — shows none of the traces of missionary hardship or decrepitude [...]. Instead, there is only the springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure. It is not pain that hovers about his straining chest, his tense abdomen, his slightly contorted hips, but some flicker of melancholy pleasure [...]. Were it not for the arrows with their shafts deeply sunk into his left armpit and right side, he would seem more a Roman athlete resting from fatigue... (Mishima, 2004, p. 36).

Mishima declares that this picture meant a turning point in his life, because, then, he understood his attraction to homoeroticism. The arrows as emblems of masculinity are metaphorical images that bind to the eroticization of the scene of the martyrdom. They relate to the male world of war to which belonged the soldier, but refer to phallic symbols which penetrate the body of the young Roman as a reference to homo-erotic sex, also marked by the violation of the flesh. This overlap of elements appears both in Guido Reni's painting and Yukio Mishima's testimony. They both accentuate the physical strength, the nudity and the youth of Saint Sebastian, the soldier. Thus, in the same manner that Mishima's description was done through a journal entitled *Confessions of a Mask* depicting an entire whole generation that had their sexuality's expression repressed, the theme of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian serves the homo-erotic universe by relating to the life of a Christian soldier, which is also in the countercurrent of history and therefore in a position of rejection, similar to the one historically relegated to lovers who dare not speak their lovers' names.

The iconography of St. Sebastian that was related to the conjunction between sensuality and martyrdom during the Renaissance became even more powerful upon taking on a transgressive nature in contemporary art. Marked precisely by the violation of the codes of autonomy of art towards life, a process that had a strong participation of mechanical means of image obtainment (Crimp,

2005), contemporary art was created in a favorable environment for the representations of the Catholic saint, now taken as a reference of identity, especially after the sexual revolution and the gay politicization in 1960. Many artists pored over the topic, concerned with its intrinsic meaning, as is the case of David Wojnarowicz, Pierre et Gilles and Mario Röhnelt, among others.

In a precursor attitude of this iconographic wave, Mishima embodied the saint in a kind of photographic performance, the *Portrait of Mishima as St. Sebastian* (1966). The photograph originated from a partnership between Mishima and the Japanese photographer Kishin Shinoyama, in full appropriation of Guido Reni's pictorial work, which is noticeable by the gestures of the writer, the setting and the position of the arrows. It bears noticing that Mishima took part in this work a few years before his triumphal public suicide through *harakiri* in 1970. The fictional and autobiographical overlapping of layers with each other, as the relation between pleasure and pain expressed in Saint Sebastian's figurative tradition, seems to be premonitory to the Japanese writer's choice to "leave the scene", as a sort of conscious adherence to the melancholic impulse of drama (Benjamin, 1985).

The Italian artist Luigi Ontani (1943) painted *Saint Sebastian in the Wood of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni)* in 1970. In his work, Ontani also proposed to think of this iconography from the perspective of the photographic image, and in this manner accentuated its drama as much as its underlying homo-erotic content. Ontani recreates the Catholic saint's martyrdom likely as homage to Mishima, an aspect noticeable due to the allusion to Guido Reni and also because of the year of completion of the work, which coincided with the Japanese writer's death. Upon observing Ontani posing as a Saint Sebastian in wait, we can also notice the pun connected to the Wood of Calvenzano, Guido Reni's hometown. That is also a subtle provocation present the title of the work, accentuated by the construction of the image, because it alludes to the so-called *marginal territorialities* (Perlongher, 1995), i.e. the urban settings of libidinous male encounters in places such as the woods, parks and abandoned places.

However, among the most disconcerting works on the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian is the first film by Derek Jarman (1942-1994), named *Sebastiane* (1976), entirely spoken in Latin. It is a work of blatant homo-erotic and self-referential bias, whose aesthetic is deeply marked by a *melancholy sensibility* (Lee, 2002). The film is a new reading of the Christian saint's life, reinventing the atmosphere of desire that surrounds its mythical construction. Although

the English director explores the fate of Sebastian martyred by the arrows in a final scene that refers to the voluptuousness of its pictorial appearances, the conveyance of the story prioritizes a long preamble of characterization of the Saint's character as someone who does not acknowledge defeat regarding beliefs and desires, not even in the face of corporal punishment imposed by the military authorities. The scenario has as its backdrop a military base for training soldiers, privileging the male concentration in an isolated environment. Masculine confinement is a recurrent homo-erotic fetish, having been exploited, for instance, in Jean Genet's thoughts on prison, present in the autobiographical novel *The Thief's Journal* (published in 1949) and in the film *Un chant d'amour* (1950).

Derek Jarman also devoted himself to literature and painting, although his artistic notoriety was consolidated in film, despite his filmography being seen as excessively aestheticized and decorative by orthodox critics who didn't realize the extent of his cinematic expression. Beyond the aesthetic attributes that would come to connect Jarman to Fellini or Pasolini, his filmography blends the same political criticism he made use of in his paintings during the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In his work, he denounced the Church's moral influence upon culture, and with that he made himself noteworthy as a controversial film director who revisited the history of gay martyrs in a voluntarily camp style in films such as the aforementioned *Sebastiane*, and *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Ricardo III* (1991).

Even in spite of its apparent ridicule, exaggeration and lack of seriousness, the *camp* aesthetic (Tamagne, 2001, p. 251)¹ has as an important political value precisely because it deals with elements that break with good taste and transgress high culture, approaching what we now know as *queer* culture. In the film *Sebastiane*, camp is present in the way the director dramatizes the gay aesthetic using and abusing his fetishes: the allegorical initial Roman party scene that culminates with the sperm shower coming out of a gigantic artificial penis on the face of a dancer; the effeminate affectation of Emperor Diocletian; the many violent motifs with strong erotic references; the different references to homo-erotic fantasies that appear throughout the film, such as the bare costumes of the Roman soldiers, ridiculing the reality they refer to.

1. For Tamagne, the camp aesthetic, as initially defined by Christopher Isherwood in *The World in the Evening* (1954) or Susan Sontag in *Notes On "Camp"* (1964), rests on cross-dressing, parody, theatricality, pose and artificiality. Camp is the means through which Oscar Wilde's decadent aestheticism, Andy Warhol's pop culture and the transgender delirium in Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1976) converge.

In 1896, American pictorialist photographer Fred Holland Day (1864-1933) takes on the adventure of photographing more than 200 images regarding the passion of Christ, becoming one of the forerunners of the intersections between homo-eroticism and religiosity through photography. As a production based on photographic narrative of a biblical episode and due to its homo-erotic bias, several are the points of convergence between Holland Day's work and Jarman's film. In Holland Day's photographs, the Roman soldiers who presided over the crucifixion of Christ, for example, resemble the tormentors of *Sebastiane* much for the camp attributes that guide the dramatization, their costumes and the reigning mood of sensuality. It is important to note that, just like Mishima, in the series about the crucifixion of Christ, it is the very photographer who serves as model for the pictures. *The seven last words of Christ* was displayed at the Philadelphia exhibit in the same year and was very criticized, especially due to the unusual combination of the sacred with nudity and, above all, to the photographic representation of a man linked to homoeroticism embodying the figure of Christ. In *Study for the crucifixion*, the suffering of the Messiah is transposed to a teenager in a full-frontal nude, filled with languid sensuality, in an image that refers to the memorable sculpture of the *Slave* (1514-1515), by Michelangelo, a subject that evokes passivity and, at the same time, the sensual eroticism of the male body as an object of the spectator's gaze (Greer, 2003, p. 109).

Day's appreciation for decadentism, expressed in the *Yellow Book* journal, to which he was an editor, is another aspect that promotes a connection with Jarman, especially considering Camp in *Sebastiane*.² Likewise many photographers of that time, he was very fascinated by the transgression of conventions, both with regards to the aesthetics and subjects of his images (upon proposing challenges to make photography rival with painting) as to religion (upon crossing barriers of taboos and iconographic conventions). It bears reminding that in 1907 he also delved on the theme of St. Sebastian, producing an interesting pictorialist version of the martyr through a daring first foreground up-shot.

However, if compared to Day's passion of Christ and St. Sebastian, Jarman's film is more radical and transgressive. The first reason for that is that it assumes a homo-erotic aesthetic, displaying lengthy shots of sexual interaction and nudity of the soldiers, but also because it tackles its own political context. In fact,

much of Jarman's work has a corrosive critical bias, including for not hesitating in bringing to light the permanence of the homophobic manifestations that prevailed in the 80s, with the return of censorship both in the United States as in England, respectively during the terms of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. In this sense, the film *Edward II*, which portrays a gay heir to the English throne in the 13th century, is also a political statement against *Section 28*, that, in 1988, prohibited the financial aiding of activities that served to "promote homosexuality", setting the return to Puritan censorship regarding homoerotic expression in the United Kingdom. Measures such as this act set up a sense of witch-hunt, established in Europe and the United States with the spread of the AIDS epidemic.

Jarman's pictorial work has also a strong political *queer* engagement. As a carrier of the HIV virus, his work in painting is guided by a clearly activist sense, which marked the trajectory of several artists in the same condition in the early 90s, motivated by the poetic collective effort that made use of strategies to promote awareness about the need for public policies to treat and prevent AIDS (Santos, 2011). This is featured in Jarman's last paintings in the early 90's, in which the artist covers with red ink the pages of homophobic tabloids and writes over them with words like *queer*, *blood* and *spread the plague*, thus manifesting criticism of the role of the press in the spreading of gay prejudices in the context of the epidemic outbreak. As evidenced, Jarman's homoeroticism is marked not only by the visibility of the homoerotic desire, masterfully expressed in his timely filmic appropriation of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, but also by the political fight to give visibility to the hardships of a marginal social segment.

When Yukio Mishima and Luigi Ontani embodied St. Sebastian, more than imaging a coded message about homoeroticism – such as Renaissance and Baroque artists –, they raise the private world that affects them to the center of their art. A world whose appearance was facilitated by photography, by means of their narratives and fictional potentialities. They speak in the first person and go into raptures about their vision, in which eroticism and faith intermingle in the most peculiar way, as well as biography and topic. Likewise, when Derek Jarman revisits the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian through film – which has its origins in photography –, he does not do so to simply narrate the suffering of sacred character or to produce surreptitious messages to knowing viewers, for his poetic speech is the result of a troubled era in which the manipulation of images opened the doors to other political accesses to the

2. In *Notes On "Camp"* (1987), Susan Sontag refers to Aubrey Beardsley's decadent movement as camp aesthetic, and Fred Holland Day was a great admirer of the illustrator, as well as Oscar Wilde's.

body, otherness and desire. Thus, in Jarman's work, there is a state of autobiographical tension that speaks of itself from the other.

If eroticism, as well as religion, are human dimensions that complement each other, the state of tension to which I talk about when I mention Jarman is also present in Mishima and Ontani. The three artists display this state in the transposition of the sacred to the profane and the profane to the sacred, as if these were counter-discursive political strategies consciously elected by their authors. It is important to consider that, paradoxically, the arrows, which are a crucial element of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, in addition to being *symbols of sexual penetration and sexual coverage*, also refer, in a mystical/religious level, to *the thinking that leads to light and to the creator organ that opens up to fertilize and illuminate the enclosed space* (apud Virel Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 435).

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ILLUSTRATIONS CAPTIONS

Illustrations presented in this article can be viewed in the article's version in Portuguese.

Picture 1. Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian*, 1618, oil on canvas, Palazzo Rosso, Genoa.

Picture 2. Kristin Shinoyama, *Yukio Mishima self-portrait as Saint Sebastian*, 1966.

Picture 3. Derek Jarman, photogram, *Sebastiane*, 1976.

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