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5 On Mutilation

The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction

Andrew Slade

Much of Chuck Palahniuk's writing centers on the mutilation of bodies. Bodies are broken from the outside. They are beaten unrecognizable and destroyed beyond recuperation. Bodies are transformed from one sex to another, one gender to another. In Palahniuk's writing, the human body is the site for the inscription of a search for modes of authentic living in a world where the difference between the fake and the genuine has ceased to function. Not just the rules that had regulated behavior and prospects for a good life, but the rules that determine desire, pleasure, gender identity, family role are all undone. The prospects for a life of the true, the good, or even the real have been lost to their own proper simulacra.

The destruction of bodies through their mutilation is also the destruction of their fecundity. Liberated from the past and the tyranny of the father, there is then no future. Perhaps this is too hasty. Absent the function of the father, might some different kind of future emerge for the self-generating, orphaned sons? Is it possible that the mutilation of the body is a way to create new possibilities for value, identity, in short, an authentic existence in a world which appears to have erased these possibilities?

Eduardo Mendieta argues that "Palahniuk's novels are attempts at surviving American culture" (395). In his interpretation of Palahniuk's work, American culture must be overcome precisely because of its oppressive tendencies. American culture is sick and Palahniuk offers a diagnosis and prognosis of that sickness and of how we might reclaim the health of the individual (Mendieta 408). Mendieta's interpretation lets us inquire into the aesthetic mode in which survival appears in the novels. The representation of survival is itself sublime, though the events themselves that press pain, terror, or death upon us are not. But, still, the fact of survival emerges belatedly. The practice of mutilation becomes sublime by being cultivated as a practice of redemption and survival. Monstrous behavior extends outward to monstrous acts and mutilated bodies. Chuck Palahniuk's mutilation of bodies addresses this question through an ironic, if classical, deployment of a sublime aesthetic, one in which pleasure comes only with pain and terror. A monstrous sublime, then, that pursues the

representation of pain as a source of redemption and solace subtends his writing. This chapter describes the way in which Palahniuk translates the attraction and revulsion associated with mutilated bodies into a figuration of the sublime that belongs to the postmodern Pacific Northwest of the United States as a strategy for surviving the onslaughts of a culture that, ironically, also aims at destruction. Finding the sublime in and through the practices of mutilation, Palahniuk's writing finds a moment of redemption and recuperation of authentic existence.

THE CLASSICAL SUBLIME AND THE POSTMODERN EVENT

Edmund Burke establishes the sublime as a concept that applies not only to writing, but to aesthetic experience in general. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke gives the following general definition: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest feeling which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 36). The sublime is associated with pain, danger, and terror. Objects may solicit these three responses either directly, by association, or by analogy. Further, it is the strongest feeling that we have, its pleasure is a pleasure of privation, a feeling that he names delight. Delight is the pleasure that accompanies an encounter with some object that excites ideas of pain, danger, or terror and the privation of those objects. The delight in the sublime comes about in a subject when pain, danger, or terror press upon him or her but is not fully actualized; the pain subsides, the danger dissipates, the terror recedes and is not actualized on the body of the subject. While the sublime sentiment is ubiquitous through English and European Romanticisms, the term lost some currency in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jean-François Lyotard's work has been largely responsible for a retrieval of the sublime as the aesthetic mode most appropriate to the postmodern. Beginning in *The Postmodern Condition* and continuing through his later essays in *The Inhuman*, *Postmodern Fables*, and his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard has sought to think through the sublime as a testament to the crisis in knowledge that constitutes the condition of thought in its postmodernity. In its classical formulation, the sublime belongs to an aesthetic of modernity, which he carefully distinguishes from postmodernity:

Modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing content; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet

these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept. (81)

The modern sublime, as described by Burke and Kant and carried forward by Theodor Adorno, is a sublime marked by the pangs of nostalgia for a lost unity at the core of contemporary experience. For Kant, the sublime is fundamentally counter-teleological. It is a disaster for the mind. Yet, the supplement to sublime contrafinality is given by the teleologically ordered conception of nature wherein the sublime appears as a monstrous excrescence that troubles the Critical system of philosophy. For Burke, the limit between the experience of terror that produces the sublime and an experience that is simply terrible, is a fine, but empirical one. If a terrible object presses too closely, becomes too intimate, it will destroy the possibility of the sublime feeling and will be, simply, terrible. In the modern sublime the pain of nostalgia becomes pleasurable, and we are able to yearn for what has already passed, even if what has passed is but a fantasy of the reality of that past moment. The postmodern sublime evades all nostalgia; it is the combination of pleasure and pain that comes about in and through the effort to present the unrepresentable.

The effort to present the unrepresentable is the work of writing and art. It is an experimental work by necessity since neither its form nor its conceptual determination can be known in advance of its presentation. In *The Differend*, Lyotard expresses this situation as a question: "Is it happening?" The sublime feeling itself is the testament that something is happening. In *The Inhuman*, commenting on Burke's formulation of delight, Lyotard writes: "What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here,' the most minimal occurrence" (*Inhuman*, 84). These occurrences are events of language, the minimal ruptures in the generic conventions. The postmodern novel finds its own undoing as novel in the language of the novel. The site of this undoing in Palahniuk's work is the body. The body is the site where the occurrence of the sublime will happen. Commenting on the American painter Barnett Newman, Lyotard says, "When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that *there is*, to respond to the order to be" (*Inhuman*, 88). What Barnett Newman did in painting, Palahniuk does in the novel—if only in the restricted sense that he seeks a mode to present events of survival in a culture that militates for conformity to simulacra of experiences, to consume them as we would our prepackaged food or Ikea catalogues.

We can see Palahniuk's bodies as sublime figurations of the imperative *to be*, even if his characters are imperfect at actualizing this ontological and existential imperative. Even if this imperative itself has become suspect, he

continues to believe in it and produces novels that seek out its actualization. In "The 'Guts' Effect," for example, he writes explicitly about going to "the places that only books can go" (H 411). In *Haunted*, these places are sites of horror, terror, and pain. That is, potentially sublime sites—in our proximity to these sites, in the intimacy of the act of reading, an act that Palahniuk conceives of sexually. "A book," Palahniuk writes, "is as private and consensual as sex" (H 410). Through the book, we are brought to a site of release where only books can go. We go with our bodies in the same way that Palahniuk's audience faints when "Guts" is read. We faint, we don't die. We rush to the end of the story, to survive it, to be and to continue to be. The mutilated bodies that appear in this writing are the means through which he approaches the unrepresentable in narrative, the minimal presence of the "there is," of the beyond the limit of representation. The sublime sentiment emerges with the pain of the failure to present the unrepresentable and the pleasures that attend the privation of pain that the writing initiates. This is also the postmodern event that characterizes the sublime sentiment. This sublime feeling is part and parcel of Palahniuk's attempt to survive American culture.

VIOLENCE AND THE SUBLIME

At our first encounters with nearly any Palahniuk text, we may believe that we have entered a universe governed by a sadism that renders even the most horrifying scenes of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* rather quaint. "Guts," for example, with its depiction of the extraction of St. Gut-Free's large intestine through his rectum by the force of a swimming pool pump while pursuing his own masturbatory pleasure, is almost unreadable. Of course, that is the point. The text is a kind of a dare to the reader to risk going forward in pursuit of his or her pleasure, not unlike the pleasure that Gut-Free himself seeks. The point is to gain in pleasure by risking extreme pain. On the other side of mutilation, the text promises an authentic pleasure that cannot be gained through the daily simulacra of pleasures packaged and sold to us as if we wanted them. Our only real pleasure can be one that surprises us and we can never prepare ourselves for a surprise like we can calculate pleasures in catalogs.

In *Haunted*, Palahniuk reproduces the formal conditions of Sade's unfinished *120 Days*. He displaces Sade's aristocratic libertines with ordinary people who happen to want to be writers. There are many similarities between the two texts; both take a group of people to an isolated place where they can practice, perfect, and enjoy the crafts of their imaginations. But, like Sade, Palahniuk is not in a position simply to enjoy the debauches of his characters. Sade, of course, spent most of his life in prisons where he created the representations of his greatest crimes, but did not actualize them. Sade is fundamentally a writer, and not a real life Dolmancé or St. Ange, even if he would have liked to be. Palahniuk, too, is a writer, and

also a writer in the model of Sade. He seeks to do things that only books can do, to access a certain freedom of imagination that is only permissible with the intimacy and privacy of a book. It is only in books that the mutilation of bodies will be able to enter the popular imagination as a way into an authentic existence.

We might think of the mutilation of bodies as Palahniuk's narrative experimentation with the possibility that something might happen, to speak in a Lyotardian way. His texts look for something to happen through the tropes of love stories. Thus, unlike Sade who resolves his search for greater freedom and authenticity through an increase of debauchery and crime, Palahniuk resolves his through love stories. As Jesse Kavadlo remarks, "his books' solution is laughter and romance" (12). Palahniuk's texts resolve the presentation of the mutilated body through ironic laughter and a good love story. The brutal violence that he describes is not invention. The story of *St. Gut Free*, for example, has its model in a legal case, famously pursued by 2004 Democratic U.S. Vice-Presidential candidate John Edwards. Edwards was vilified by conservatives in the press as a trial lawyer who enriched himself by pursuing frivolous suits like the case of a young girl whose intestines were sucked through her anus by a swimming pool pump. In our world, finding violence is easy since it is everywhere. Finding a solution to violence, a critical, ethical, and imaginative resolution to it, is hard. Violence becomes a condition of the imaginary universe because it structures American experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Violence in Palahniuk's texts is a vehicle to get us to think through what might emerge beyond violence, on the other side of a cultural climate where our existence is more a simulacrum of experience. In this world, pain becomes a way into the experience of authentic pleasures.

Violence appears in a range of forms in Palahniuk's writing. Attacks on gender and sexual differences in *Fight Club* and *Diary*, environmental devastation in *Lullaby*, violence in the family in *Fight Club*, *Lullaby*, *Diary*, and *Rant*, and the list could go on, are all treated in the novels. Palahniuk's interrogation of these forms of violence concerns their proper resolution and the relation of that resolution to a future that will be worth living. He opts for love stories as the solution to violence. This is a move that has been taken by other writers in their attempts to think through the facts of violence and its aftermath, notably Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* and Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing*. The turn to love as the source of redemption for violence has contemporary, critical currency. In this, Palahniuk differs from Sade, for whom crime was the solution.

PALAHNIUK'S LOVE STORIES

In a certain respect, all of Palahniuk's works are love stories, though *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Lullaby*, *Diary*, and *Rant* have a discernible

difference: the romantic fantasies nurtured in the Hollywood cinema and disseminated throughout the American imaginary as normative forces, the power of which we should not underestimate, are decidedly absent. Palahniuk's writing reconciles and redeems suffering through the tropological power of love, but it is a love that has born the force of mutilation. Only after the lovers' bodies become nearly unrecognizable as bodies does their love emerge as the fount and fruit of what we are encouraged to hope will become, in the end, a better world. It is a ridiculous and sublime love that emerges as the source of an equally ridiculous and sublime hope for surviving American culture.

The sublime puts us in touch with terror and death without, however, bringing them to pass. Death equivalents bring us into intimacy with terror without overtaking us. This is the core of the sublime sentiment in its post-modern interpretation. The pleasures of the sublime, then, implicate the body as the site or bearer of terror and release from terrors that produces the delight of the sublime described by Edmund Burke or the secondary overflowing of the vital forces that Kant describes. The intensities of the sublime are bodily as well as cognitive and affective. This description of the sublime is most appropriate to Palahniuk's own descriptions of reading as an act of intimacy, an interpretation that implies also the intimacy of the act of writing. Palahniuk's mutilations demand to be understood under the aesthetic of the sublime.

Diary provides an example: the novel begins with Peter Wilmot's body atrophied and contorted and takes us toward Misty Marie Kleinman's mutilated body as the salvation of the livelihood of the old guard Waytansea Islanders. In this, the novel is a story of sacrifice and salvation. Misty's body is sacrificed so that she can produce the art that will have been the restoration of the wealth of Waytansea Island. Throughout, Misty has few prospects. She moves from one scene of deprivation to another while the condition of her existence progressively deteriorates as her art, what she had aspired to perfect in her youth, even if she had always been but mediocre, gains a kind of recognition. She is treated by Dr. Touchet who ruminates to her on the spiritual use of pain even as he is producing her pain. "The interesting part," the doctor says, "is when you look at pain as a spiritual tool. . . . Pain and deprivation" (D 187). Through his reflection, "Misty just keeps on painting" (D 187). There is already something completely clichéd in the old notion that suffering produces spiritual awakening or great art. Nonetheless, Misty's indifference to Dr. Touchet's justifications for pain put her at the limit of human community and thus shares in the modernist idea of the artist as one who has become inhuman, as Lyotard says in the "Introduction" to his book of that title. The pain and deprivation transform her from a living woman to a painting machine, bound to her bed in front of her canvas. By passing through this, she emerges at the end, mutilated and immortal. For a mortal to become immortal requires a kind of mutilation or annihilation, namely, the destruction of mortality

itself. This can be acquired only by passing all the way through death. We can become immortal only by surviving death. The novel puts us in the center of a discourse that is at once sublime and worthy of our ridicule. Misty produces the sublime works that save the Waytansea Islanders through her own suffering. Yet, Palahniuk's names do not let us get too carried away too fast. We are forced to wait and see what happens with the narrative. Dr. Touchet is at once the representative of an endgame: he brings Misty toward her death: *touché!* He is very hands on in this endeavor: touch it! This two-fold discourse of the sublime in search of survival that emerges through mutilation is tempered, aestheticized, rendered pleasurable through satirical irony.

At the end of *Diary*, Misty Marie Kleinman who had been victimized by the genteel natives of Waytansea Island for the benefit of their fortunes, learns that "Plato was right. We're all of us immortal. We couldn't die if we wanted to. Every day of her life, every minute of her life, if she could just remember that" (D 260). Beyond her mutilation there is no death, only survival. Survival is figured through the repetition of the Waytansea school of painters. Misty is but an iteration and repetition of Maura Kincaid. There is no escape from immortality because immortality is repetition. *Diary* is a novel in fugue; not a musical, but a psychological and corporeal fugue. The dimensions and demarcations of what we might recognize as reality are indistinct. The reality of an event is equally as plausible, hence equally true, as its negation. It is a novel of diffusion, even a suspension that, once having reached the point of saturation, produces a precipitate. What falls out of suspension, finally, is Misty's own understanding of what she learned from art school. Plato is right. But, what can it mean for Plato to have been right? If *Diary* is a Platonic novel, it takes place fully at the level of images. In the Platonic order of the universe, images are least real and least true. It appears to be the case in *Diary* that Misty is the newest iteration of the Waytansea School of painters, women who become famous later in their lives and then die, quickly, mysteriously. They suffer unto death. Misty is a new iteration of Maura Kincaid. Misty had believed that the love story was going to be her way out, her mode of escape from the repetitions of her own mother's life of poverty and suffering. Peter Wilmot was her way out. What she learns is that there is no escape. This is a reality described by British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, who claims that psychoanalysis teaches us that what we most want is what we can never have for fear of the loss of the object that having it implies (53). What she wants is escape and what she most fears is getting it. This same ambivalence can be found in Palahniuk's desire to write the love stories that will show the possible modes of survival of American culture. If we find the authentic forms of existence that will make for a future that would be worth living, then we might have to live that way, we might be stuck with that future, and it might be surprising what it entails. The pleasure and terror of the postmodern sublime also puts us in this position, forcing us to ask, with Lyotard, *is it happening?*

In the end, then, *Diary* endorses the old saw that there is redemption in suffering. Palahniuk nonetheless endorses the redemptive quality of the cliché even if the irony of its affirmation leaves us in a position where it is impossible to believe in it. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek claims of David Lynch's films, it is perhaps the ridiculousness of the characters that we must believe in if we are to understand them. Yes, it's cliché to believe in the redemptive power of suffering, but it redeems nonetheless. It is ridiculous to believe it and equally ridiculous to deny. This is where *Diary* brings us. The classical sublime that runs throughout Palahniuk's work puts him in line with a long line of writers from Longinus through Boileau to Burke and Kant. But, his departures from the rhetoric of the noble and lofty situate him with the postmodern sublime described by Lyotard. He mutilates the classical sublime with the mutilated bodies. At the end there is still a vocation that belongs properly to the human being. And still Palahniuk's classical sublime adheres to the postmodern event because the content of the human vocation is left indeterminate and the object of experimentations. He is committed to the importance of love stories even if those stories have to be completely rewritten.

CHASING SURVIVAL: LULLABY AND INVISIBLE MONSTERS

While *Diary* is essentially a love story, the plot of *Lullaby* is essentially a chase. The goal is to remove a culling song from a book, *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*. Recite the poem and the person who hears it dies. The title of the book that contains the song is indicative of Palahniuk's universe wherein the innocuous becomes dangerous. What kills us is what appears most banal. Helen Hoover Boyle and her gang travel the country in her Town Car scouring libraries and bookstores for copies of the song while she funds the search by using the song to assassinate people for all manner of clients. Along the way, Helen and Carl begin to fall in love. The conflict of the novel, again, is resolved in a love story of mutilated bodies.

In the course of searching for the culling song, from the death that the poem announces, Helen comes across another book, the grimoire. This is a book of spells, one of which can undo the power of the culling song. As the novel comes to an end, Mona and Oyster make off with the grimoire and Helen and Carl chase after them, but without Helen as Helen. Helen's dead child Patrick, whom she has had cryogenically frozen, is destroyed when he is taken from the tank and thrown across the room, shattering. In the "New Continuum Medical Center," Helen returns to her frozen child to die with him. In this moment, "her teeth are shattered, bloody gaps, and pits show inside her mouth" (L 250). She has drunk from a bottle of drain cleaner. Yet, it turns out that the grimoire contains an occupying spell and Oyster has occupied Helen's body. Helen had been destroyed as Helen,

yet a spell from the grimoire lets her occupy the body of the Sarge. Carl and Sarge/Helen pursue Mona and Oyster. As Helen, the body is in ruins, destroyed by the chemical action of drain cleaner and from being forced to eat her jewels. As Sarge, she is virile, strong, and bears the authority of the law: "‘But not to worry,’ he says, ‘I have a badge and a gun and a penis’" (L 259). As Sarge, Helen’s mutilated body and her mutilated maternity are transformed into the body that can supplement both lacks: namely, the deficiencies that all women suffer in relation to a law determined by masculine or paternal desire and the lack determined by the sexual difference. As Sarge, she overcomes all of these.

If *Lullaby* is a novel about the transformations of the body from life to death and from death to survival, *Invisible Monsters* shares the luxuriant violence and lawlessness, the interrogation of identity and desire of *Fight Club*, but translates them into the textual pleasures of the sublime. The monsters of *Invisible Monsters* are fascinating and frightening. Mendieta sees Palahniuk’s work as the exploration of individual pathology as the sign of health in a society that can only be survived. The failures of postmodern American society force the healthy individual into pathology. He reads *Invisible Monsters* as a rejection of beauty as prescribed and imposed by a taste ruled by the likes of *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, or the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue (Mendieta 399). The rejection of these forms of beauty is made apparent through their emphatic adoption of them. Rather than champion the negation of beauty as real beauty, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* take the prescriptions of the beauty industries to their monstrous end, where it loses all connection with nature and wherein everything is in transit, all terms subject to medico-technical reversal. In a telling passage (also cited by Mendieta), Brandy Alexander, a transsexual by reason of revolt rather than desire, declares, "I’m not straight, and I’m not gay . . . I want out of the labels. I don’t want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that’s not on the map. A real adventure" (IM 261). What she wants is to depart from the banal figures of beauty for sale by the purveyors of cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. She wants to adopt the "higher purposiveness" of the sublime sentiment as an authentic mode of existence as Kant described it in the *Critique of Judgment*. Palahniuk’s fiction rewrites the theory of the sublime as ennobling through mutilation. To find the higher purpose of human existence, we must pass through a series of mutilations beyond which an authentic existence can begin to appear, and, as I have argued throughout, this aim characterizes Palahniuk’s writing as a whole.

Brandy aims to upset the expected order of a respectable life: "Don’t you see?" she says, "‘Because we’re so trained to do life the right way. To not make mistakes.’ Brandy says, ‘I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I’ll have to break out and live a real life’" (IM 258). Brandy is seeking a path to a "real life." However, "A sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don’t want one, it’s the ultimate form

of self-mutilation" (IM 259). Precisely through self-mutilation can a real life emerge from the artifice of labels that much of the discourse of *Invisible Monsters* undermines. Instead of the monstrosity of bodies, the monstrosity of the categories for understanding those bodies has weighed on these characters. Because Brandy does not want to be a woman, it is the biggest mistake she could possibly make. Hence, "it's the path to the greatest discovery" (IM 259). Palahniuk and his characters are faithful that beyond mutilation a new horizon for existence will appear in which an authentic existence, a real life, becomes a reality. Brandy Alexander, however, is not conflicted by her condition. Her sister, or rather, Shane McFarland's sister, Shannon is the conflicted one. She resolves the hatred for her brother by coming to love him as Brandy Alexander, "Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander. . . . And that's enough" (IM 297). In the end, love overcomes alienation and hopelessness. Shannon and Brandy are both chasing a form of existence that only emerges beyond the limit imposed by the mutilation of the body.

MUTILATION AS SUBLIME SENTIMENT AS REDEMPTION OF AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

Lytard describes the sublime as the presentation of the unrepresentable, or the presentation that the unrepresentable is there. The sublime signals an experience in which the absolute becomes sensible—that there is the unrepresentable provokes, in its presence, a moment of resistance to the presence of that absolute. We are in the existential and aesthetic domain opened up by the reflections on the sublime inaugurated by Kant and Burke, but we lack the ethos that supplements the danger of the sublime with the safety of the finality of nature. For Kant and Burke, Nature is a system oriented toward the good. Nature is not decay, but fruition and fecundity. Hence in their view, mutilation can never be included in an account of the expansion of the good. The sublime in its modern phases is inextricable from a view of Nature and the human that renders both on the path of perfection. The modern sublime of Kant and Burke is a moment of excess to be domesticated again under the sign of the finality of nature.

In Palahniuk's postmodern sublime, the practice of mutilation is the sublime figuration of survival. Mutilation is how the sublime itself survives American culture. Antonio Casado de Rocha argues that Palahniuk's early texts ought to be understood as existentialist interventions in the creation of values and the concomitant taking of responsibility for those values, that after having probed the limits of the extremities of experience, "we might learn the craft to accept full responsibility for our life" (107). Responsibility for our freedom and creativity is undoubtedly a central concern of existentialism and existentialism is central to the break with modernity that Palahniuk has inherited. His writing has therefore to be understood in

this general context. But, more than the thematics of responsibility, authenticity is at the center of Palahniuk's fictions. He approaches the authentic life through a practice of mutilation whose first object is the body. But, the consequences of the body as first object means that none of the conceptual associations that attach to bodies can remain intact. In a world where the difference between the fake and the authentic can barely be discerned or sustained, only the most violent negations of appearances, mutilations, can give us something we can believe in, a new authenticity. The sublime figure of the mutilated body redeems the authenticity of the world.

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