

Sanguine Resistance: dreaming of a future for blood

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Blood pressure

She wasted their blood. When she could have saved lives with blood donations, she gave away the chance, and used it for aesthetic purposes instead. Blood stains. Not merely a 'waste,' then, a loss, but the selfish gesture of a self-aggrandising artist holding on to their blood, keeping it all to herself.¹ Blood count. Such commentary formed part of the heated public ticking off delivered to American artist Jenny Holzer in the German press in 1993. Blood pressure. It was almost as if Holzer was the guilty party, practically a thief. Whatever happened?

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Blood type

The first edition of Holzer's *Lustmord* series was published in the Sunday magazine supplement of *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, a German newspaper given to showcasing artists' work at the weekend. The first 28 pages, printed at 'full-bleed' that is without a 'clean' border or frame but going up to the edge of each page, showed photographs of human skin in close-up, inscribed in capital letters with hand-written tattoo-like texts. The cover of the magazine however featured a private view-like white card printed with one of the texts, using blood incorporated into the ink (a tiny amount, not the 90 litres wholly concocted in the press). This was the 'wastage' blotting out any other reading of 'I am awake where women die'. The blood was donated by Bosnian women raped by Serbian men in the Bosnian War in 1992. Hardly the first time that rape was deliberately used as a military weapon, but it was the first time that mass rape was recognised and prosecuted as a war crime by an international criminal court. Blood sports.

Diane Elam drew attention to this work in her chapter on 'Feminism' in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide* published in 2000, largely focusing on it as a linguistic performance between senders and receivers. She remarks on the undecidability of the perpetrator's sex.² Under the sign of '*Lustmord*,' however – and I don't have time or indeed inclination to more than point to the post-Weimar aesthetic exploitation of the 'sex murder' of women by men in German art and literature – this seems tendentious. Elam took note of the blood in the ink substantially in the context of its hypocritical reception: the German public recoiling from the impropriety of handling blood on the Sunday papers, not the systematic

assault from which the series took leave. Like all extant art historical criticism regarding Holzer's work, blood enters the frame in a supporting role, something from which sense is made but which itself adds nothing.

Between 1999 and 2001, Derrida's seminars focused on the Death Penalty. There, blood drew material, thematic, poetic and conceptual analysis. 'What is the meaning of cruelty?' Derrida asked, 'is it blood that flows (*cruor*)?'³ The cruelty of *making* blood flow floods the philosophical and literary archive investigated in the first volume to such an extent one might add it to the skills that *Homo Faber* fancies that he alone can possess. The 'Ninth Session' in the second volume begins with the question 'How to conceive of blood?' subsequently repeating a refrain that asks after a possible future for blood. The 'concept' is the 'end of blood' in Hegelian philosophy: this is the arresting argument from which Derrida departs. His departure does not pierce the concept in a correspondingly cruel attempt to *draw* blood. The concept is 'non-impermeable' he idiosyncratically remarks, reminding us that all 'supposedly opposed concepts' active/passive or conceptual/sensible say, 'touch each other in their coupling' and 'in the action or activity of the act, can no longer be distinguished from [their] opposite, the passion or the passivity of suffering or of desire'.'⁴

This paper returns to Holzer to ask how the gift of blood in *Lustmord* might liquidate the sterilising transubstantiation of the concept. Opening a future for blood might here offer a counter-path to *lex talionis*, overflowing the logic of calculated and cancelled debt mandated in the masculine libidinal economy of the law given brutal execution in the nationalism of the Bosnian War, and its obscene repetition in Ukraine as we speak.

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Blood loss

'The word for word, the word "cru" and "cruor," is inescapably the word blood. ... Or, to put it another way, the word for word is blood. And blood is the word believed. It is "le mot cru".' – Gil Anidjar 'Le Cru: Derrida's Blood' 2015: 15

'So, at this poste restante, a woman's message came my way recently that could not be decoded by the usual methods [...]

"At the point in the mass when they, the (spiritual) father and son, are reciting together the ritual words of the consecrations saying 'This is my body, this is my blood,' I bleed".'

– Luce Irigaray, 'Belief Itself' [1980] in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 1993, 25.

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Blood stain

Beyond the elementary description of blood donated by women including the survivors of the nationalist assault that attempted to impregnate them with Serbian children and shred their identification as Bosnian, no one specifically asks after the blood. In all likelihood, it was obtained through a pin prick to the finger or a needle in the median cubital vein. The metonymy of that blood cannot however be staunched and the disgust vehicled by the contaminating proximity of that pressing red text cannot exclude the abject force with which so many cultures yet colour menstruation. Joan Simon is the only art historian to allude to the 'archetypal fears' of 'women's bleeding' alongside the immediate traffic in blood in Germany at that time – fears regarding AIDS and a scandal over HIV infected blood supplies.⁵

Holzer's printed text, neat as it appears, does not spiritualise the blood with which it is polluted for this reactive public. It troubled the '*Sunday Times*' of a Christian country, even the Archbishop of Munich complained. Blood is a waste product, of sorts. She wasted their blood.

Wastage here does not just suggest an unstaunched flow, to sublation sticking, but ultimately signs a so-called 'pro-life' discourse. The red text awake where women die is the metonymy of blood that 'wastes,' that washes out unfertilised ova.

In the short theoretical archive of misread menstrual speech acts, the public reaction to Holzer's work is reminiscent of the account of the impossibility of hearing the suicide as speech act completed by Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri in Gayatri Spivak's foundational account of the intersection of race, class and gender 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.⁶ There, in Calcutta in 1926, Bhaduri waited for her period to start before hanging herself in order to displace the default reading of her death as the shameful admission of sexual impropriety. She was not pregnant. Never mind her radicalism and her difficulty, indeed refusal, to carry out a political assassination leading to her action, never mind her displacement of the widow's right to immolate herself only after the filth of her period has finished, Bhaduri was nevertheless embalmed within the compulsory feminine figure of falling victim to 'illicit love' by Spivak's (female) interviewees.

The moral demand for Holzer not to waste blood but to save lives at first sounds like an appeal for a transfusion, as if that would make sense. Should the survivors of sexual assault be tasked with giving blood for others less 'fortunate'? But since this is not unmarked blood, blood 'in general', but blood donated by women, 'wasted blood' and 'wasted lives' resuscitates the ghost pregnancies to which they have said 'no'.⁷ No, we are not pregnant, they say, we are not pregnant, we are bleeding and we are alive. We 'do not concept' perhaps, to paraphrase Helene Cixous.⁸

Yvonne Volkart's catalogue essay for the *Lustmord* exhibition carefully reads the entire sequence of Holzer's texts and treats them as poetry, the structure of which deserves attention. She notes that Holzer's systematic usage of forms of address consistently positions the first person as the voice of perpetrator, the second person as victim, and the third person as witness. So, yes, the I that is awake where women die speaks as perpetrator. Volkart's essay title iterates his lines too: 'I See her Song about Us.' The second person cannot make a simple or constative accusation: Volkart is sensitised to the complex way in which 'pornographic narratives' 'permeate' expression to the extent where victims feel themselves to be complicit, absorbed by the narratives of perpetrators: 'YOUR AWFUL LANGUAGE IS IN THE AIR BY MY HEAD.'⁹

In a long footnote, that by coincidence occupies the full width of the page in typographic echo of Derrida's 'Circonfession', Volkart expresses her disbelief in the pitch of this postcard from a perpetrator attached to the cover of *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. She treats the presentation of that card as a condemnation or castigation in advance of the reception of such a declaration. This magazine is not a 'red top' (like *The Sun* in the UK, *Bild Zeitung* in Germany, or the *National Enquirer* in the US). But Holzer's text addressed the wider press context and the 'cynicism' of 'short, screaming, red headline[s].' Tabloid media, Volkart suggests,

are wide awake where women, and others, die so as to be the first to tell the world, but their telling is lecherous, and amounts to a lustful presentation of death to make it palatable. In fact, we are not at all awake where women die, but bored and indifferent [...].¹⁰

Read as an exposure of the cynical news cycle, read as a 'red top,' the concept reverts blood to that which is made to flow as if it is impermeable.

Every account of *Lustmord* that I have seen has missed the sucker punch coming when this 'private view invite' card is opened. Perhaps no one looked. It is a letter:

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SHE FELL ON THE FLOOR IN MY ROOM. SHE TRIED TO BE CLEAN WHEN SHE DIED BUT SHE WAS NOT

THE COLOR OF HER WHERE SHE IS INSIDE OUT IS ENOUGH TO MAKE ME KILL HER.

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Blood vengeance

'It's a shame we couldn't bleed the commanders and the soldiers who were involved.' Holzer drily remarked, continuing: 'A few hundred thousand litres would have been great... instead of the murderers, the women who still survive were asked and they volunteered their blood. I thank them for that.'¹¹

Unsurprisingly in the *Death Penalty* seminars, the concepts of blood at stake are at one with a drive to purify: securitising, immunising, defensive. Whether in being made to flow or virtualised, the blood of castigation chastens, chastises. This concatenation prompts Derrida to open the terrain of blood as it is stage managed by the death penalty to that of blood in Freud's account of virginity.

Red tops, headlines, capital letters, death by decapitation.

It may seem eccentric that Derrida berates Freud for only barely talking about the death penalty in 'The Taboo of Virginity' especially when that brief moment serves to reorient the essay around castration. The brief apparition of the death penalty comes when Freud invokes *Judith and Holofernes*. The specific text he invokes, however, is Hebbel's 1840 tragedy that rewrites Judith as a resentful virgin left in this mortifying condition by her impotent first husband only to subsequently take her revenge upon his substitute, the conveniently invading Assyrian General Holofernes, by beheading him.¹² Judith's nationalistic defence of her homeland was, Freud tells us, merely a surrogate 'motive to conceal a sexual one'. 'Beheading' he continues, 'is well known to us as a symbolic substitute for castration.'¹³ With this flourish, castration takes centre stage. Derrida remarks, unhappily, that therefore, for Freud, 'Decapitation supplements castration: it is a figure for castration. *And not the reverse*.'¹⁴ With this one-way ticket, Freud upholds phallogentrism with one hand and depreciates the death penalty with the other: the death penalty, like death, becomes unthinkable as

such. Thus, castration assumes the status of 'the first violence, violence itself.'¹⁵ This is all the more instructive given that Freud's title 'The Taboo of Virginity' cannot but recall his prior origin tale 'Totem and Taboo' in which that first violence was patricide, committed by the band of brothers.¹⁶

The lever that shifts Freud away from 'primitive' rituals with which to manage the flow of deflowering comes from one of his patients' dreams: a young woman betrays her 'wish' not just 'to castrate her young husband' but 'to keep his penis for herself'.¹⁷

At the beginning of the ninth seminar, Derrida wrote of the 'non-impermeability' of the concept as that which might let down the speculative Good Friday that (ostensibly) raises blood above (mere) matter. There he reminded us of the tactility between ostensible conceptual oppositions that 'touch each other in their coupling' and 'in the action or activity of the act, can no longer be distinguished from [their] opposite, the passion or the passivity of suffering or of desire'. Near the end, in an exasperated critique of Freud's sexual politics, those couples re-emerge in hostility, resentment and revenge. Crucially, this critique sits alongside Derrida's affirmation of psychoanalysis as that which helps us properly ask the question of what happens to us when we cry, blush, laugh. It helps us appeal to what he names the 'phylogenetic psychoanalysis [...] of the living body in general.'¹⁸ Hostility gains ground in Freud's appropriation of what Ferenczi floats as a 'paleo-biological speculation', in which the battle of the sexes is embedded as a permanent war. This embattled couple disavows contact. The inaugural crime is now hers: not having a penis of her own she is perpetually hellbent on stealing his. In hock to her precisely ahistorical 'paleo-biological' 'natural' deficit, she alone 'become[s] passive and suffer[s]'.¹⁹

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Blood rites

Scanning between 'primitive' cultures and his own time, Freud goes to extraordinary lengths to refuse any notion of progress or alteration. To do so would, minimally, admit something of history to the relations between the sexes. Indeed Derrida suggests that what is at stake in here 'is nothing less than the question of history for Freudian psychoanalysis.'²⁰ The origin story of the 'paleo-biological speculation' is not enough, resentment born of penis envy must remain an eternal condition evidenced within his own context.²¹ Remarkably, Freud produces as evidence: 'the strivings and in the literary productions of 'emancipated' women'.²² The scare quotes belong to Freud. The force of accusation laid against women who write stuns Derrida for several

reasons that could possibly only be articulated with such precision in light of the accumulated seminars on the Death Penalty. Flat out he asks 'Why would the appropriating castration of the penis be something feminist and literary *par excellence*?'²³ And, why have these 'spokeswomen' 'in fact been engaged in literature?'²⁴ Shifting the grounds of the question, Derrida responds that is not that Freud's 'targeting lacks insight,' but that 'the phenomenon he has not failed to identify requires an interpretation about which psychoanalysis does not utter a word.'²⁵ Diverging from the letter of Freud, Derrida affirms what he acknowledges as the 'original and irreplaceable role of literature in the feminist cause' and links it to the fact that it has been poets and writers generating abolitionist discourse – not philosophers 'or even politicians'.²⁶

In such a gesture Derrida implicates himself, his own work, and the thought and the risk of writing in deconstruction. Such an alignment does not simply affirm emancipated women in a political gesture of solidarity ('everyone is castrated'), nor does it lock in to a politics in which those women can only be emancipated by assuming the impermeable sovereignty in which men are encouraged to believe ('no one is castrated'). Rather, the vulnerability affirmed in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* comes to mind: the vulnerability of the living in general, the mortality of the living in general, the 'ability to suffer,' the power to 'not be able,' as well as the couples in contact in the *Death Penalty* seminar.

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Blood donation

The blood that she wasted is construed to evidence violence. While we know that the work was made in proximity to bloody hell as the metonymy of nationalist misogyny, the reception of Holzer's *Lustmord* automatically reverted to something else. The automaticity is instructive.

This is a crime scene. Right? Right, but which one? Recalling Freud's indictment of writerly 'emancipated' women once more, and the entrenchment of a war of sexual difference (singular, oppositional), he describes a 'phase' in the early life of little girls (although as Derrida points out this is hardly a phase when it is apparently of eternal relevance). Envious and hostile towards 'their favoured brothers,' little girls 'even try to urinate standing upright.'²⁷ Parenthetically, Freud remarks that this envy is not so much to do with their *lack* of the 'sign of masculinity' but because of its 'diminished size.'²⁸ Never one to let a parenthesis go to waste, Derrida makes much of this, writing:

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It is a question, then for these poor girls, in their virile protest, of standing upright so as to lay claim to their rights, their alleged rights. Such that between the rectitude of right (*Recht, droit*) and the rectitude of the erect body, there is an analogy, a common rection or direction that may lead one to think that the boy enjoys a natural right, so to speak, one which the girl tries vainly, and precociously to supplement by way of an artificial *mimesis*, of a non-natural right, a right that can only be claimed and asserted in hatred, a non-natural right, thus a historical right [...].²⁹

Illegitimately keeping it to herself, building her 'House' upon it – bolstering her professional name as an artist and one 'who writes', there is something uncannily familiar about the reception of Holzer's incorporation of the women's blood.³⁰ She takes the credit. Blood banked: she turns the gift into a 'gift-that-takes'.³¹ She is 'the bad guy.' The women and the context of their donation are entirely obscured or transfigured. History diminishes before the one crime. In echo of the vengeful woman's castration of her husband, invading General, or other man, in order to steal the penis that she is otherwise naturally denied, how ludicrous this seems transforming the memory of bloodshed into an impermeable sign, perhaps the concept. 'No future for blood' here.³² But rendering the blood impermeable both recalls the blood integral to erection and thus to the upright figure that in a sleight of hand figures the rectitude of right (*Recht, droit*) and its most ideal form, the elevation of carno-phallogocentrism. Holzer is entitled to neither. Hence, in the public refusal to be touched by the blood that they nevertheless handled that Sunday morning, she was chastised.

But the concept is 'non-impermeable.' Taking that Freudian parenthesis in the direction it actually implies, Derrida suggests that rather than the blunt binary of presence or absence of the penis we 'should' be lead to the literate *fort/da* of erection/detumescence. The shifting rhythm would then become inherently *internal* to 'erection itself' 'in men and in women.'³³ Man would lose his 'natural standing'.³⁴ This loss is only vindicative within the very conceptual frame that Derrida – and Cixous – are at pains to shift. In the essay called 'Castration or Decapitation' Cixous speaks, in the name of pleasure, to 'relieving man of his phallus' but this gesture - which is not a blood-letting - returns him to an 'erogenous field and a libido that [is] shifting [and] diffused'.³⁵

Blood without being made to flow in the place where exactly that cruelty was enforced. 'Is there a future for blood?'³⁶

¹ Noemi Smolik notes this specific reaction of the German public as indicative of a functionalist attitude in her essay 'History inscribed on Women's Bodies' included in Holzer's subsequent exhibition catalogue, *Lustmord*, Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, (1997) 127.

² Diane Elam 'Feminism' in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, 2000. See especially p.96: 'Yet the language here does not rule out women occupying the position of Perpetrator, of committing acts of violence against other women.' This may be technically true, and exceptionally the case, but it serves no feminist purpose to obfuscate the overwhelming fact that the perpetrators of sexual violence are men. This is especially so in the context of sexual violence in the Yugoslav conflict.

³ Derrida, *Death Penalty V 1*

⁴ Derrida, *Death Penalty V 2*, 218.

⁵ Joan Simon, 'No ladders; snakes: Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord*,' in *Parkett*, 40/41, 1994, 82.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

⁷ Contemporary to the writing of this chapter Ukrainian women were being raped by Russians. Some that survived and managed to leave Ukraine for Poland found themselves pregnant and in a country that has banned abortion. SOURCE

⁸ Cixous

⁹ See also Interview. Christian Kammerling and Jenny Holzer, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, 19.11.1993 Magazin No. 46 – reprinted in the *Lustmord* catalogue.

In discussing the pornographic specificity of the texts Holzer remarks that documentary videos about the abuse of women in the former Yugoslavia were available as porn videos. (122)

¹⁰ Yvonne Volkart 'I see her Song about Us' in Jenny Holzer, *Lustmord*, Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, (1997) 116. Emph. added.

¹¹ Jenny Holzer, qtd in Interview. Christian Kammerling and Jenny Holzer, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, 19.11.1993 Magazin No. 46, reproduced in her exhibition catalogue, *Lustmord*, Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, (1997) 123.

¹² Artemisia Gentileschi's own rape was frequently read as the motivation for such a bloody topic as *Judith* - never mind that biblical themes were entirely standard, and 'strong' women were few and far between.

¹³ Freud, *ToV*, 207.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 228. Emph. added

¹⁵ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 228.

¹⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo 1913*, 'The Taboo of Virginity' 1917. Echoing Bosnia – the displacement of mass rape by the theft committed by the artist..

¹⁷ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 230.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 225. He follows this by refusing to attribute such 'capacities' to the 'proper of man'.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 234.

²⁰ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 235.

²¹ In parentheses Derrida remarks that this attitude is 'contrary to what his heirs, claiming to be more subtle, assert in order to exempt him from accusations of organicism or biologism'. *Death Penalty 2*, 232.

²² Sigmund Freud 'The Taboo of Virginity' [1917] in *On Sexuality*, V.7 in the Freud Library (London: Penguin, 1991): 279.

²³ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 232.

²⁴ 232, *emph.* Original.

²⁵ Derrida, *Death Penalty 2*, 232.

²⁶ 232-3. Ref Wollstonecraft?

²⁷ Freud 'The Taboo of Virginity' 205

²⁸ Freud 'The Taboo of Virginity' 204

²⁹ Derrida, *Death Penalty II*: 237

³⁰ Incorporation not introjection. Classically this would be a mourning that is not 'worked through' – but wouldn't introjection and the conversion to the signifier be at one with the clean-up operation of the concept that again betrays the women?

³¹ Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation'

³² Derrida, *DP II*, 234

³³ Derrida, *DP II*, 234

³⁴ This also affects Man's standing above 'the animal'. Explore in chapter?

³⁵ Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation' 51

³⁶ Derrida, *DP II*, 219