

The Cult of Killing and the Symbolic Order of Western Barbarism: How the Media Worships Violence and “Ritualized Atrocities”

The Lynching of Mouamar Gaddafi

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The display of the lynching of Mouamar Gaddafi exposes our societies for what they are. It mesmerizes and dismantles our capacity to think and critically assess a historical process.

By focusing public attention on what constitutes a “ritualized atrocity” these gruesome images confirm that the US Empire actually represents an unprecedented regression, a step backwards in the history of humanity.

They show that the objective of the war on Libya was not only conquest, leading to the plundering of oil or of Libyan assets, but also, just as was the case in the Crusades, the destruction of a symbolic order, leaving room for the sheer enjoyment of an act of killing, as displayed by the media, in a capitalist World Order run amok.

When watching the broadcast images of the lynching of Mouammar Gaddafi, our political leaders manifested a strange pleasure. “*Strange Fruit*”^[1], these images remind us of the images of the hanging of Saddam Hussein organized on the day of the Eid al-Adha, the feast of the sacrifice.

These two instances inscribe us into a religious structure which, through the substitution of the human sacrifice to the one of the ram^[2], restores the primitive image of the Mother goddess. It turns the Old Testament upside down. Such book-free religion is reduced to a fetish^[3]. It has neither Other, nor Law. It merely bids public opinion to enjoy the spectacle of death.

Through images, the will to power becomes unlimited. Transgression is no longer bounded as in the sacrificial rite, neither in space, nor in time, it is everywhere. It echoes the continuous violation of the order of Law that can be observed since the 9/11 attacks.

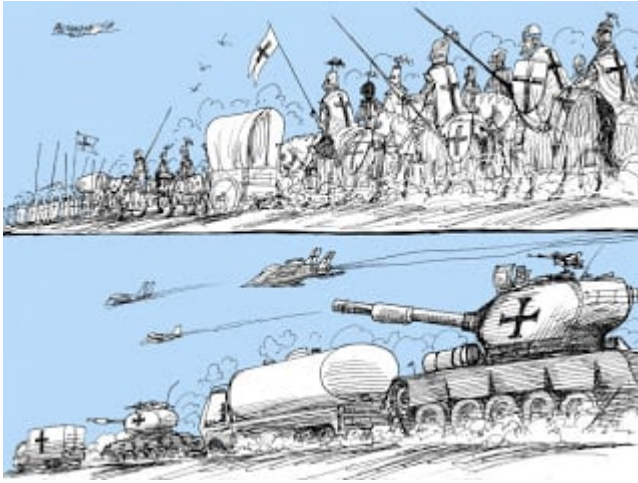


Confinement within tragedy

The way Gaddafi's body was treated is a token of the tragedy the Libyan people went through. The treatment of his remains was the object of a double exception, a double violation of the symbolic order that rules society. Instead of being buried on the same day as required by Muslim rites, his corpse was displayed for four days in a cold room, before being buried in a secret location in spite of his wife's request to the UN that she may retrieve the body.

This double decision by the new Libyan authorities places the Libyan people in a situation that the Greek tragedy explored long ago. As they deny the family the right to bury the body, the new political leaders do away with the symbolic order. As it deletes any connection between human and divine law, the National Transitional Council merges the two and grants itself the monopoly of the sacred, thus placing itself above the political level.

The NTC's decision to deny the family the right to funerals and to display the corpse aimed at suppressing the signifier of the body and retaining only the image of death. The order to derive orgasmic pleasure from the image of the murder suffers no boundary. The fetish perpetuates compulsive repetition. The urge feeds itself and moves from one image to the next, from the image of death to the image of killing without any distinction. Its function is to increase the will to power.



Controlling what must be seen

Thus the profanation of the corpse is only one element in its underlying “fetishism”. What matters is to be found in the lynching of Gaddafi as shown, again and again, through images filmed on mobile phones and relayed by the media. They intrude in real time into our daily lives.

We are part of the scene because in the scopic drive, lynching becomes a sacrificial act only because of the onlooker. The pictures show people filming and deriving pleasure from the filmed object. They exhibit the moment of the look. It is not the object which is presented as an offering any more but the meaning which is displayed so as to control what must be seen.

Lynching as an image is a Western tradition. When they photographed their victims, the members of the Ku Klux Klan already produced the human sacrifice as a show. The treatment granted to Gaddafi is part of this “culture.” However, it is different in one respect. The staging of the KKK’s actions was highly ritualized. It mimicked some underground social order.

Here, the mobile phone pictures are free of any signifier. They become more real than reality. They occupy the real which, *de facto*, exists only as annihilation. They show the bursting of society and so the power of imperial action. These images show a world which is continuously collapsing. They put us in a state of dread and create psychosis. They destroy whatever relation there was to fellow human beings. monades whose approval is required.

While language sets us in a collective space, images are intended for single individuals. They prevent any social relation, any symbolization. They are the paradigm of a monadic society. Thus, these images tell less about the conflict itself than about the state of our society and the scheduled future of Libya: permanent war.

The sacrifice of a scapegoat

These pictures show the killing of a scapegoat. They update the notion of mimetic violence as developed by René Girard in his reading of the *New Testament*.^[4] Through the repetition of the sacrifice, they introduce us to a compulsive violence without object. If the scapegoat attracts violence, contrary to what Girard claims, he can’t stop it. Peace can only be brief. It is only the preparation of a new war. Each sacrifice leads to another. The destruction of Libya must be followed by the one of Syria, of Iran... Violence becomes infinite and

foundational.

As in Christian statements, the commentaries of the media about the pictures of the murder of Gaddafi transform the scapegoat into a victim. If Gaddafi is lynched, it is because he “wanted to die that way”. He is not the victim of an exterior attack, he is said to have obeyed an inner law. His execution is not supposed to be the result of his resistance, but the accomplishment of a personal destiny. This Christian procedure has also been highlighted by René Girard. The figure of Christ shifts the notion of scapegoat to the one of victim who gives himself up in order to “redeem” the original sin.

So, free from all this symbolic debt, from any social body, these images and their commentaries contribute to the systematic inversion of the symbolic Law, as well as to the permanent state of emergency, installed after the 9/11 attacks. Political power is sacralized and replaces the symbolic order.

Regression from language to the image of union with the mother goddess

Such images take us back to a time when human sacrifice was an important aspect of social life. They consist of a return to the primordial fantasy of fusion with the mother[5]. Ethnological studies, as well as psychoanalysis, have showed that human sacrifice results in a return into a maternal structure. Love and sacrifice are the attributes of a social life which does not distinguish between political and symbolical orders. They are the paradigms of a matriarchal society which achieves the fusion of the individual and maternal power.

Those images belong to a long Christian tradition of reversal of the basis of the Old Testament. Abraham’s story is the moment of establishing the interdiction of human sacrifice. Christ’s death, on the other hand, is Isaac’s sacrifice in reverse. Instead of the ram taking the place of the offered son, it is the Messiah son who becomes a lamb.[6] In the Old Testament the death of the ram is that of the primitive god. It symbolizes a shift from an actual sacrifice to language: *“If there is a god, we find him in the words of the covenant (language)”*[7]. That shift unveils the existence of a place that produces metaphors and thus transforms the real. The operations of shifting and metaphor, which form the heart of this story, are the essential procedures of the rules of language[8]. The law of language is the inscription of the non-identity of the word and of the object. In the Libyan conflict we are located outside language from the beginning. Gaddafi is a tyrant since this is what is said about him. The massacres committed by his regime do not have to be proven, but simply confirmed. The image of the dictator speaks for itself. It does not include any contradiction or face any reality. It is more real than reality.

The end of any symbolic order

The law of language involves accepting that language is first the language of the other. It signifies our acknowledging that we are incomplete. Such symbolization effected by the inscription of dependence on others makes it possible to enter into a process of mutual recognition and thus to build a human society.[9] It introduces a symbolic debt, a network of relationships in which individuals find where they belong and are not their own fathers. Contrary to the original sin, this debt unifies since it relates people on the basis of a common future and not of an origin, whereas the original sin is confined in the image of the Superego.

Gaddafi was not completely part of the globalized capitalist system. He still functioned

according to traditional values such as the gift as an act that creates social bonds. He seemed truly affected by the desertion of his 'friends' Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Blair...[\[10\]](#) He must have thought that the exchange of gifts had set up a system of mutual recognition that guaranteed he would be granted some protection. He thus showed that he had not understood the nature of capitalism, a system in which all social relationships are abolished. While in former societies the exchange of objects is the basis for mutual relationships, in the capitalist system money and market values have become subjects. Gaddafi's gifts could only be perceived by those who received them as somehow an advance payment on what they were entitled to. The dark gods of this society can only be those of the market.

Images of orgasmic pleasure

Through the law of language man steps away from nature, from the mother goddess that has neither inside nor outside. Instead of functioning as a founding moment, murder is abolished to provide access to speech. The human order that emerges is different from the divine order. Individuals are no longer all powerful children, they are cut off from maternal power.

Images of the lynching of Gaddafi, by contrast, take us back to origins and to omnipotence. They inscribe us into a religious structure prior to the separation operated by the prohibition of sacrifice. They reintroduce us to incestuous violence, to the destructive haptic drive.[\[11\]](#) The imperative order to share in orgasmic pleasure overrides any political consideration. The most significant illustration is provided in the interview in which Hillary Clinton receives the images like some offering: she shares her exhilaration in front of the lynching: 'We came, we saw, he died!' she said on CBS.[\[12\]](#)

The violence inflicted onto the Libyan 'Leader and Guide' was also the moment other Western leaders chose to express their pleasure at how successful their initiative had been. 'We are not going to cry on Gaddafi', said Alain Juppé.[\[13\]](#)

Bruised body as an icon of violence

Statements by our political leaders after the broadcast of these images confirm that the elimination of Gaddafi was the true objective of this war, not the protection of people. The text by Barak Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron, published in *The Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Al Hayat* and *Le Figaro* on 15 April, mentioned that "[our objective] is not to remove Qaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Qaddafi in power."[\[14\]](#) So, his violence would lie essentially in the fact that he did not give up power while it was inconceivable that he should stay. His image is supposed to embody tyranny since he did not meet the Western leaders' love for the Libyan people. "*He (Gaddafi) behaved in a very aggressive way. He received good conditions to surrender, he refused them*", M. Juppé added.

The media confirm that "*dictators always end up like this*". The marks of violence expose the invisible. Lynching becomes the very proof that the tortured was a dictator. These stigmata show us what we couldn't see: evidence of the massacres to be perpetrated by Gaddafi. They are a revelation of his intentionality, of that thing in the name of which NATO justified its intervention.

An identity is established between the massacres attributed to the colonel and his blood-drenched body. The marks on the living body, then on the corpse are not perceived as the

sign of the “liberators’” violence, but of the blood Gaddafi shed.

The violence of the murder shows us that it is about revenge. It testifies that its authors are victims and that this assassination belongs to a sacred order.

The exhibition of a boundless power

The images of the sacrificial act make it possible for our leaders to exhibit boundless power. The French Minister of Defense, Gérard Longuet, disclosed that on a NATO request the French air force had ‘stopped’, i.e. bombed Gaddafi’s escaping convoy.^[15] He thus acknowledges violating the UN Council Security’s resolution.

On the same occasion Alain Juppé also acknowledged that the aim of the invasion was indeed to give power to the National Transitional Council: ‘the operation must come to an end today since our objective, i.e. help the NTC in liberating the territory, is now achieved.’^[16] The success of the NATO offensive was accompanied by numerous statements by the winners that they systematically but rightly violated the UN resolution. Bernard Henri Levy, French diplomat, philosopher, writer, film director and strategist, also testified in his book *La guerre sans l’aimer* that “France directly or indirectly provided significant amounts of weapons to the Libyan rebels fighting to overthrow Mouammar Gaddafi’.^[17] Those various statements recall those by Tony Blair, when acknowledging there had been no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq but that nonetheless the war against Saddam Hussein was fully justified since it put an end to a dictator’s rule.

Victim and sacrifice: the values of a return to barbarism

The murder of Gadaffi, this enactment of the victims’ revenge, results in his not being tried. This death coincides with the interests of oil companies and Western governments. Their close relations with the colonel’s government will not be exposed. Substituting such images of lynching to a trial at the International Criminal Court means that instead of being stopped by speech, violence becomes infinite. Libya like Afghanistan and Iraq will become a theatre of permanent war while our political systems slip into a permanent state of exception which accompanies the emergence of an absolute power that acts beyond any Rule of Law.

A military intervention in the name of Western leaders’ love for the peoples who are victims of a ‘tyrant’^[18], glorified by the display of this tyrant’s sacrifice, reveals a relapse into barbarism.

The treatment of the sacrifice of Gadaffi as an icon corroborates the Christian reference of a war waged in the name of love for victims. The destruction of Libya by NATO forces lies in the long tradition of the Crusades, those wars against the symbolic law waged in the name of the God-man.^[19] Those wars already resulted from a reorganization of Western Europe under the authority of the Pope.^[20] Nowadays, this conflict, even more than the Iraq war, results in a complete subsumption of European countries under the US Empire.

The war for democracy is the postmodern version of the Holy War. The latter was sacred, not because it was waged against ‘infidels’ but because it was preached by the Pope, the infallible vicar of the God-man. Today, the sacred nature of the attack results from the naturally democratic nature of the US initiator, whose president received the Nobel Peace Prize at the beginning of his mandate, before any political act. This prize consecrates the president of the United States as a Christian icon, as the embodiment of peace and

democracy. In this secularized version, man is no longer sacralised as the image of God, but as his own image, as the image of his peaceful and democratic nature.

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Article in french :



[Le lynchage de Kadhafi: L'image du sacrifice humain et le retour à la barbarie.](#), November 11, 2011

Translated by Christine Pagnouille

Notes

[1] Song composed in 1946 by Abel Meeropol to denounce the 'Necktie Parties' (lynching) that took place in the south of the USA and to which white people took part while wearing their most beautiful outfits. This song was sung by Billie Holiday, and has known a huge success on its release.

[2] When lifting a knife to strike his son, Abraham found a ram instead of the child for the sacrifice. It is the ram that must die, the father-animal, the primitive father, that is to say a fantasy line of ancestors, but also an archaic divinity, a ferocious image of God restlessly claiming sacrifices. See Jean-Daniel Causse, « Le christianisme et la violence des dieux obscurs, liens et écarts », AIEMPR, 17th international congress Religions et violences, Strasbourg, 10-14 July 2006.

[3] Paul Laurent Assoun, *Le fétichisme*, Que sais-je ?, PUF, 1994. « Le fétiche ou l'objet au pied de la lettre », in *Éclat du fétiche*, *Revue du Littoral* 42.

[4] René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, Le Seuil 1972.

[5] The primordial significant of the desire for one's mother is normally pushed back through the substitution of the Name-of-the-Father introduced in the symbolic order. Sacrifice is a return to the natural state of unification with the mother. In Catherine Alcouloumbre, « La métaphore paternelle », *Espaces Lacan, Séminaire 1998-1999*.

[6] *Bible chrétienne, II, Commentaires*, Éditions Anne Sigier, 1990, p. 318, in Nicolas Buttet, *L'Eucharistie à l'école des saints*, Éditions de l'Emmanuel, Paris 2000, p. 38.

[7] Jean-Daniel Causse, « Le christianisme et la violence des dieux obscurs, liens et écarts », AIEMPR, 17e congrès international *Religions et violence ?*, Strasbourg 2006, p. 4.

[8] They are the mirror of two fundamental linguistic operations, that of substitution and that of combination, i.e. the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axis. See Vincent Calais, *La théorie du langage dans l'enseignement de Jacques Lacan*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2008, p. 59.

[9] Hervé Linard de Guertechin, « A partir d'une lecture du sacrifice d'Isaac (Genèse 22), *Lumen Vitoe* 38 51987), pp. 302-322.

[10] « Kadhafi préférerait mourir en Libye qu'être jugé », *La Libre Belgique* et AFP, 31 November 2011.

[11] « Le sacrifice se centre sur le noyau sacrificiel originel : l'endocannibalisme » in Pierre Solié, *Le sacrifice fondateur de civilisation et d'individuation*, résumé *adhes.net*, <http://www.adhes.net/Documents/Extraitsdelivres/PierreSoli%C3%A9/LESACRIFICE.aspx>

[12] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xlvs6g_hillary-clinton-nous-sommes-venus-nous-avons-vu-il-mourut_news

[13] « La mort de Kadhafi marque la fin de l'engagement de l'OTAN en Libye », *LeMonde.fr* avec AFP, le 21/10/2011. http://www.lemonde.fr/libye/article/2011/10/21/la-mort-de-kadhafi-marque-la-fin-de-l-engagement-d-e-l-otan-en-libye_1591699_1496980.html

[14] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/opinion/15iht-edlibya15.html>

[15] « L'aviation française a stoppé le convoi de Kadhafi, affirme Longuet », *TF1*, <http://videos.tf1.fr/infos/2011/l-aviation-francaise-a-stoppe-le-convoi-dans-lequel-se-trouvait-6778966.html>

[16] « La mort de Kadhafi marque la fin de l'engagement de l'OTAN en Libye », *LeMonde.fr*, Op. Cit.

[17] « Les coulisses de la guerre selon BHL », *La Libre Belgique*, le 7/11/2011, <http://www.lalibre.be/culture/livres/article/698459/les-coulisses-de-la-guerre-selon-bhl.html>

[18] Jean-Claude Paye, Tülay Umay, « Faire la guerre au nom des victimes », *Réseau Voltaire*, le 9 mai 2011, <http://www.voltairenet.org/Faire-la-guerre-au-nom-des>

[19] Maurice Bellet, *Le Dieu pervers*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1979, pp 16-17.

[20] Paul Rousset, « Les origines et les caractères de la première Croisade », La Baconnière, Neuchâtel 1945.

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