

PANIC MEDITATIONS

ARTHUR KROKER

PANIC ASTRONOMY

45

What is the relationship between astronomy and torture?

I have often been puzzled by this relationship because of a particular, and grisly, outbreak of State-sponsored political torture. In the 1970s while living in Italy I followed with outrage the accounts of the violent days at the beginning of the Pinochet regime in Chile, and the spreading thereafter of the shadow of political torture, from the disappeared to the mutilated. I also noted, and wondered about, a coincidental newspaper account that in the very first weeks of the political coup the United States, which had just sponsored the new military regime, announced also a major funding support for astronomy observatories high in the Chilean Andes.

Since then, I have thought of the surrealistic contrast between the screams of the tortured in Chilean politics, and the spectral, space-gazing silence of the astrophysics laboratories. There was no apparent political relationship between them, other than that of the ideological indifference of scientific value-neutrality. One was immanently inscribed in the torture-techniques of earth-bound knowledge; and the other was almost utopian, or at least an appealing instance of scientific humanism over the years, in its steady announcement of the discovery of new galaxies, pulsars, quasars.

I was reminded of this relationship when reading recently in the *International Herald Tribune* that a major competition had just been held to fully technify the Chilean observatories, placing them directly under the radio telemetry control of one of the major industrialized countries. The headline read: "From Bavaria to Chile to Eighteen Billion Years Ago." It was only ironic, and perhaps a point of undoubtedly unfair historical coincidence, that Hitler's political birthplace had thus claimed a double inheritance: not only the continuation anew of fascism in the Chilean state; but now, also, in the Chilean galactic observatories.

Or is it something different, and more explicitly sinister? Not a relationship of the silence of non-identity between astronomy and political terror, but, at least on the basis of a mutual epistemological origin in panoptic and disciplinary knowledge, their common issue from a deeply shared cosmology. An unhappy intellectual complicity, therefore, between astronomy with its panoptic eye gazing into space as the purest expression possible of the will to truth, and political torture with its panoptic turned earthward in the equally purest expression of the will to power. Is there not, perhaps, at work here a more secret cabalistic knowledge between political torture, which begins and ends with a pure astronomy of the victim's body, and astrophysics, itself a will to pure facticity, which compels the universe to confess its secrets.

Thus, two kinds of scientists — star gazers and body gazers: both performing according to the very same rules of knowledge, and both responding to the same political impulses — if, that is, postmodern power be thought about in its deepest and most constitutive expression as the dynamic unfolding everywhere of the will to exact the tiniest secretions of information from its citizenry (social nature) and from the galaxy (nature). All of this carried out by complicit methodological strategies: whether by surveillance under the sign of the panoptic eye, by the decoding of the cabalistic signs of information acquired, or by the more immediate political stratagem of forced confessions. Is it, perhaps, that like Foucault's prisons or medical clinics, which are the truth-sayers of the hidden rules of power in society at large, the astronomy laboratories, high up on the Andean mountaintops, also provide the ruling epistemological codes for State terrorism: power as panoptic surveillance; the complicity of knowledge and power in the postmodern condition; and the minute gathering and decoding of information acquired from the static of the physical universe, or from the screams of the tortured, a whole *dédoublement* of stellar knowledge and bodily facticity under the sign of an indifferent galaxy.

If it be objected that astronomy is a pure science, far removed from the specificities of political struggle and brute power, then let it also be noted that the postmodern state, of which Chile is an avant-garde, not retrograde, expression, surely has its ocular origins in Bentham's fateful design of panoptic surveillance as the ruling power stratagem in the era of power/truth. If it be said that this ocular knowledge is, through the medium of astrophysics and technologies of galactic exploration, already space-bound, then this just might mean that the fateful relationship between astrophysics and torture in Chile stands ready now to be recapitulated at a higher and more intra-galactic level of abstraction in the future. A surrealistic inquisition, then, of star-surveillance and body gazing as also part of Chile's tragic political legacy for the western world.

So, finally, why *panic* astronomy? Because at least in the Chilean case, the very continu-

ation of astrophysics in the Andes throughout all of these dark years is surely founded upon and constituted by a suspension of ethical discourse about the relationship between science and torture. Panic astronomy? Over and beyond the terrible infolding of the will to truth and the will to power, astrophysics in the Andes is also in the way of a looking away from the tortured screams of the innocent. And so, of course, the Bavarian (telemetried) connection, not only as a superior technological form for the management of the ocular power of surveillance, but also as an expedient ethical suppressant.

Consequently, a more troubling question: In that deliberately imposed silence between two state technologies — one involving the seduction of the scienticization of the stars, and the other implicated in the violence of the scienticization of the tortured body — in this almost impossible gap of ethical indifference between science and terror, might there not also be found a privileged, and terrifying, glimpse of our political future?

PANIC DREAD

Peter Watkin's brilliantly evocative film, *Edward Munch*, captures perfectly this Norwegian painter's curious historical fate as the artist whose tragic imagination marked the end of nineteenth-century panic melancholy at the *fin-de-siecle* and the beginning of twentieth-century panic dread at the *fin-de-millennium*.

Melancholy? That's Munch's famous painting *The Sick Child* as a searing sign of the *stratégie fatale* of the nineteenth-century modernist mind. Here, Munch's artistic imagination is enucleated within the horizon of the modernist antinomies: tragic finitude at being trapped in fatigued tubercular bodies as death-chambers (the painting is of Munch's dying sister); and a frenzied revolt on behalf of life (the stripping away of all extraneous detail and the scarring of the canvas). This is not bourgeois expressionism in revolt against naturalism, but a meditation on suffering and fatigue carried to such a point of intensity that the painting actually speaks, it cracks, it weeps the silence of perfect muteness.

And panic dread? That is *The Scream* as the twentieth-century Munch. Here, the painterly imagination no longer operates at the edge of tragedy and free expression, perhaps because Munch has witnessed the breaking into the body of all the technical interpolations of subjectivity. Even free expression — the critical aesthetic distancing strategy of the nineteenth-century mind — runs into the bitter knowledge that transgression itself is only part of a rupture which confirms.

When meditating on Peter Watkin's filmic study of Munch, I think not so much of Nietzsche, but of Albert Camus. In *The Rebel*, Camus said of our predicament that we would stand midway between two forms of revolt: metaphysical revolt against the absurd (with its

demand for an impossible unity), and historical revolt against injustice. Refusing suicide, Camus chose complicity with history. Munch, however, was the more insightful because ambivalent. Perhaps more than Nietzsche, and certainly more than Camus, Munch intimated that our condition would be to live with the constant tension of the suicide, of the scream. A scream so continuous, so total, and so mute with psychotic intensity that it would sound like laughter from the joke of a cynical history and a cynical politics. As Munch says in Watkins' film, he finally saw only panic dread in what was apparently social progress.

PANIC PIGEONS

There is an old, abandoned brewery in Montreal. It hasn't been used for forty years. However, it is home to thousands of pigeons.

Last year an entrepreneurial artist received a grant from the Canadian Government for a new art installation (his own). Refusing the customary museum space, the artist in question held his show at the old brewery, with its legacy of pigeons and their droppings. Refusing also this natural landscape, which had its own quality of sublimity and terror, the artist reclaimed the factory space to the aesthetic standards of contemporary art exhibitions (white walls, black floors, painted pipes), and was, in fact, in the process of trying to hustle three million dollars in grant money to make the reappropriated landscape of the factory a site where rising real estate values could be happily complicit with rising artistic values.

Once the art exhibit was opened to the public, it was evident that the artist's work was in the best tradition of contemporary, and traditional, French perspectives on the Enlightenment. The dialectic in his work was between hyper-rationalization and hyper-expressionism. Violent pastiches of Turner's paintings (where the paint actually dripped from canvas "plagiarisms" of Turner's *Vesuvius* onto the floor) alternated with exquisitely refined, and mathematically precise, renditions of the measured world: the squaring of the circle; the mapping of the natural landscape into a tidy grid of longitudes and latitudes; the whole Cartesian reduction of space to a mathematical formula.

However, missing from his work was any sense of mediation, specifically between his depictions of sublimity and terror in Turner and the Cartesian appropriation of the natural landscape or, more generally, between the dual legacy of enlightenment: romanticism and rationalism.

On this same opening day, though, a curious event took place. Two pigeons suddenly swooped in through the door and sat on one of the installations. It was reported that the artist went berserk, screaming that someone had left the door open, flapping his arms (in a real case of pigeon panic), finally succeeding in chasing the pigeons out.

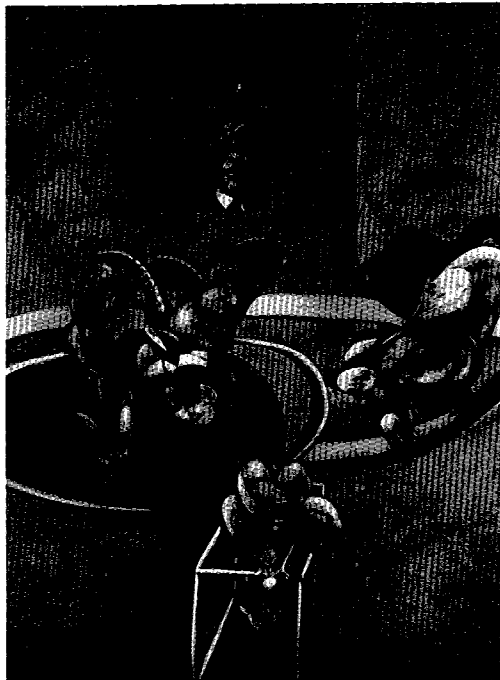
The pigeons flying in the door, of course, gave the lie to the whole venture, not just to the lack of mediation in the French Enlightenment of which this artist's work was the most recent example, but also to the complicity of romanticism and rationalism in refusing nature and the double complicity of art and real estate values in refusing pigeons: Montreal's newest homeless victims.

Panic pigeons, therefore, as the dark spirit of the dialectic of enlightenment coming home to roost.

PANIC PSYCHOANALYSIS

The Schizoid Subject

Francis Bacon is the painter of the postmodern body which is actually peeled inside out, splayed across the mediascape, with its organs dangling like passive servomechanisms waiting to be fibrillated from outside.



FRANCIS BACON,
*THREE FIGURES AND
PORTRAIT* (1975)

The Hermetic Body

It is just the opposite with the artistic productions of Lucien Freud.

If Freud (as the grandson of Sigmund Freud) is the painter par excellence of the death of the psychoanalytic subject, that means that his art is a screen-effect, a truth-sayer, of the disappearance of the famous reality-principle of the unconscious in the postmodern condition. In Freud's artistic productions, the postmodern subject is represented as inert and evacuated, actually imploded with such intensity that the body serves as a tomb for a postmodern self which does not exist.

In many of Freud's paintings, and particularly in those featured in the recent retrospective of his work at the Beaubourg in Paris, his portraits of the feminine subject push the conventional symptomology of the modernist psychoanalytic subject to its point of excess, and then collapse: hysteria (the portrait of his first wife who, with exaggerated eyes always gazing outward, quietly strangles the cat); compulsion-repetition (Freud always paints one picture — supine women in suppressed silence staring blankly into white space); displacement and projection (friend with rat); and an intense and unresolved mother fixation coupled with a determined reduction of womanly subjects to 'girls'.

Here, we are left with a serial scene of vacant subjects, isolated, supine, silenced, their gaze turned outward: not as some have claimed a recovery of anguished human identity, but just the opposite — cancelled identities to such a degree of compulsion that their bodies actually implode, resurfacing finally as blank screens. Indeed, if the Freudian subject can possess such blank identities and if the symptomology of the painting can be so banal, maybe that is because the Freudian subject no longer exists except as an artistic echo, a painterly image-reservoir, of an already vacated subjectivity. Not then the unconscious any longer, but the full publicization of the collapsing subject. Not dream states, but disembodied dreams as the prevailing sign of postmodern psychosis. And not even a subject any longer, but a memory trace onto which are inscribed all of the cultural signs of the end of the psychoanalytic subject: painterly mothers, strangled cats, friends with rats, women as girls, and always the intense, unresolved and compulsive fixation with the mother figure. The common point: not Freudian psychoanalysis, but the implosion of the Freudian subject into Bataille's history of the eye with its erotics unto death. Probably against his own intentions, Lucien Freud has produced a brilliant parody of the limitations, and neurotic fixations, of the psychoanalytic subject. In his work, the unconscious moves outside the body, and the blank stare of all his painterly subjects is left as a necessary social remainder of the reduction of the self to a mirrored-image of the psycho-simulacrum.

While Bacon may paint the fully exploded body, the organ which is turned inside out

and splayed across the postmodern social terrain, Freud paints the hermetic body, the body which implodes into the silence of non-identity. A distressed and emblematic sign of the endpoint of the psychoanalytic subject, Freud fully explores the ruins within. Indeed, in his art, even the quality of the oil-paint changes over the years, from light colors and smooth quality in his early works to mottled skin colors and rough, raised oils in his later works. It is as if the text of the canvas begins to crack apart and to speak in the geography of its colors and textures of the reality of the ruins within. Not so much the ruins of the womanly subjects in these paintings, but the degree-zero of the panic male vision which is represented in all of its melancholy brilliance and aridity in the artistic productions of Lucien Freud.

Reason and Madness

If Lucien Freud is the truth-sayer of the end of the psychoanalytic subject, then it might also be said that Francis Bacon is the truth-sayer of science as power. Curiously, while Lucien Freud is the intellectually faithful grandson of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, Francis Bacon is the collateral descendent of Francis Bacon, the author of *Novum Organum*, and with it the creation of the governing episteme of modernist scientific discourse. As if by an ironic gesture, two of the key axial principles of western culture — psychoanalysis and science — are inscribed by blood lineage in the artistic imaginations of Bacon and Freud. Here, art is finally a truth-sayer of the deprivations of the western episteme: of the final production of the fully scienticized subject as a grisly alternation between the schizoid and hermetic self.