Corporal violence: painting beyond the imaginable

(Recommended music: “Miserere Mei Deus” by Allegri, performed by “The Choir of New College”)

Whatever human beings do, they do it first of all using skin, the largest organ in the human body. The skin is our protective camouflage that keeps the internal organs unexposed while acting as a mediator between the inside and the outside by being sensitive to the slightest change in the environment. When a baby is born the most information he or she receives is through touch. In the first few days the parent-newborn relationship is ‘fateful, in that it determines the child’s subsequent interaction with all future relationships’.[1] Therefore skin is ‘capable of representing a wide spectrum of symbolic meanings’.[2] Saint Augustine said: “The greatest evil is physical pain”. This essay will discuss the relationship between art and anatomy along scenes of martyrdom of a saint and a satyr and how blood found its use as a contemporary artistic medium. It also draws parallels between the Jusepe de Ribera's paintings and some real accounts of torture.

Born in 1591 near Valencia, Ribera had settled in Naples as a teenager. Being originally Spanish he travelled to Rome where he studied classical sculpture and Renaissance art, and undoubtedly got influenced by the extent to which Caravaggio adopted chiaroscuro.[3] Seen as a ‘hybrid figure, his art encompasses two artistic idioms, painterly and graphic’.[4] The shocking images of pain have often been described as ‘grotesque in their realism’.[5] Lord Byron later wrote about how Ribera “tainted his brush with all the blood of all the sainted”. Indeed, Ribera’s paintings are exceptionally powerful in their realism. The scenes of extreme violence are perhaps based on what he might have seen in Naples and Rome. “These pictures were done to shock, to create visual impact in their day,” says Xavier Bray, the co-curator of the exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Ribera was almost obsessed with expressing horrifying and harsh scenes.

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[1] Gentie Marx, *Clinical Management of Mother and Newborn*, (Springer-Verlang, 1979), p. 47

[2] Didier Anzieu, *The skin ego* (New Heaven/London 1989), pp. 14-15

[3] Edward Payne, Xavier Bray, *Ribera: Art of violence*, (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2018), p. 11

[4] Ben Luke, *Ribera - Art of Violence review: Gory details exude raw power and beauty, the London evening standard,* <https://www.ceeh.es/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ribera_Evening_Standard.pdf>, [accessed 11 December 2018]

[5] Xavier Bray, ‘Curators in Conversation: Ribera and the Anatomy of an Exhibition’ *(ARTES, Iberian & Latin American Visual Culture Group)* <https://artes-uk.org/tag/xavier-bray/>, [accessed 11 December 2018]

This is manifested in two paintings called “The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew” and “Apollo and Marsyas (1637)” [fig. 1]. In the myth that is sometimes referred to as the first case of flaying, the satyr Marsyas challenges the god of the muses, Apollo. The satyr competes using shepherd’s pipes against the lyra of the Olympic god. Marsyas was defeated and ‘punished for questioning the superiority of the god. Apollo then cut the skin of the living body’. The tears of martyr formed the Pharygian river “Marsyas”.[6] The myth can be understood as follows: If one is not fully equipped to compete, fight or face a real challenge, but still proceeds, then one shall fail and be punished for it. Ribera is excellent at depicting the agony on the face of the satyr. His preparatory drawings [fig. 2] featuring detailed studies of ears, noses and screaming faces recall the unusual facial features, particularly the nose of the figure of beheaded “Saint John the Baptist” by Marco Zoppo [fig. 3]. Perhaps Ribera took inspiration from this painting and the “Christ as a Suffering Redeemer” by Andrea Mantegna painted in 1485 [fig. 4]. Indeed, Ribera’s painting vividly translates the scream, as overwhelming as if coming out from a deep cave, despite Apollo looking very calm as if playing his lyra. Perhaps, the scream of the satyr is Apollo’s play with the strings of skin of Marsyas. The deliberate inversion of the face upside down creates extra dizziness and translates the scream even wider. Ribera ‘caught reality in explicit sensory detail’.[7] This particular painting speaks beyond its theme as flaying the alive body is a form of dissection. There are documented accounts of Japanese scientists doing horrific experiments on people in the Unit 731, that are disturbing to even read. As 72-year old farmer, then a medical assistant in the Japanese army easily recalled dissecting a man alive without any anaesthetic: “The fellow knew it was over for him and so he didn’t struggle when they led him into the room. But when I picked up the scalpel he began screaming. I cut him open from the chest to the stomach and he screamed terribly and his face was all twisted in agony. He made this unimaginable sound, he was screaming horribly, and then stopped. The reason for vivisection was to see what the disease does to the man’s insides, the Chinese prisoner was infected with a Plague as part of the research project to develop plague bombs for use in World War II”.[8] If Ribera had never seen a face of a person flayed or dissected alive then he had to imagine an unimaginable horror and did it exceptionally well.

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[6] Florike Egmond, Robert Zwijnenberg, *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture* (Ashgate, 2003), p. 14

[7] Ben Luke

[8] John Bankston, *Invisible Enemies of Atomic Veterans*, (Trafford publishing, 2003), p. 202

The way the Baroque artist captures the horror, pain and anguish of St. Bartholomew is unsettling [fig. 5]. Apostle Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles, was possibly executed in Armenia. He was flayed alive and beheaded for having converted the king of Armenia to Christianity. The king's brother was enraged and ordered to torture St. Bartholomew, which he endured with courage. [9] His right hand is tied to the lifeless tree and is being flayed while his left leg is being tied by the second torturer, such chain like position signifies tension [fig. 6]. Moreover, the overall position of the body resembles a scene of the Christ descending from the Cross, and perhaps makes a direct link to the suffering of both [fig. 7]. St. Bartholomew's skin is lighter which distinguishes him from the torturers. Their skin is dirty with soil, blood and sin, while saint's skin also seems dirty, it is not the dirt of sin but of martyrdom. The particular whiteness of Bartholomew's skin is a tool to draw the eye towards his body, and signifies forthcoming death. His right fist turned dark blue and is already bloodless because of flaying, the solar plexus has a blue undertone too, signifying that possibly he is making his last breaths. When conducting an experiment on the photograph of this painting using computer photo tools by setting the exposure and contrast at their highest, one could see what appears to be an already flayed body [fig. 8]. In contrast, the painting "Venus, Mars and Cupid" by Rubens does not have the same effect. Ribera perhaps used a red undertone and manipulated under layers of the saint's body in a unique manner to make it more corpselike [fig. 9]. The torturer uses his own hand to pull the skin away and hence is literally getting under the saint's skin. Moreover, the animal appearance of the executioner in a form of exposed row of sharp teeth and almost totally black eyes, make him look even more brutal. He resembles a cruel executioner who does it every day like a butcher in a slaughterhouse. The presence of blood is reduced to a bare minimum, possibly suggesting that the life energy is getting more scarce, or to highlight the facial expression of the martyr.

Much in the same way as Ribera uses paint to depict blood and flesh, a contemporary American artist Jordan Eagles uses animal blood from the slaughter house to create art [fig. 10]. In an interview he explained: "I was questioning the connection between body and spirit." He began using real blood and medical drawings as a guide and 'the works came alive with the first drop'. He continued: "Blood emits spiritual energy. My works propose philosophical questions about mortality, spirituality and creation. The works become relics of that which was once living,

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[9] Spillman Francis, *The Twelve: Lives and Legends of the Apostles* (The Gold Head Group, 2017), pp. 62-71

embodying transformation, regeneration and an allegory of death to life."[10] Indeed, the so called threshold, the border between life and death is evident in the Ribera's depiction of Saint Bartholomew. The mat effect of the painted surface and thick canvas contribute to the whole body of the saint appearing dry and brittle. The violence of Ribera's paintings can be connected with the forceful and yet elegant impasto technique, in which 'thick, heavy, opaque stokes of paint are applied to the painting surface'.[11] The artist draws particular attention to 'worn, dried, creased skin of old men's bodies rendered through open brushstrokes on rough canvas'. The textures of these surfaces are 'horrendous and rough; they bear the excessive violence of the paintings'.[12] The existential gaze of Saint Bartholomew is disturbing, he does not look at the viewer and he does not look away. His beard responds accordingly to the suffering of the flesh, it appears electrically charged. Ribera makes the moment of suffering suspend in time and viewers freeze on front of the suspended scene. In North China that was occupied by Japan in 1940s, then the experiments of unsettling cruelty were conducted by scientists in order to find out how to treat Japanese soldiers from frostbite. Prisoners were forced to stand motionless for half an hour in a -30 degrees celsius environment, while exposing a naked part of the body to the cold. Then they were taken indoors, and boiling water was poured on the frozen extremities, and this would be repeated until the skin and flesh would come off the bones.[13] The malevolence of these experiments is unimaginable, perhaps it could be stated that this is a form of flaying to the core, to expose not just the muscular anatomy but bones of the skeleton.

The second painting of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew [fig. 11] 'confronts viewers with a paradoxical image of a body that is brought to "life" only to be put to death'.[14] Ribera performs magic that makes matter through paint and using a brush gives it a shape and, hence, a body. Bartholomew's body is wrinkly and more pink and lively than in the precious painting. He is tied at his feet by one executioner, while another sharpens the knives that will slice his skin the knife-

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[10] Jane Szita, *One Artist, One Material: Fifty-five makers on their medium, (*Frame publishers: Amsterdam, 2018)*,* p. 117

[11] Macpherson Kevin. "Experience Impasto." *Artist's Magazine* 15.10 (1998), p. 29

[12] Bogdan Cornea, *Flaying the Image: Skin and Flesh in Jusepe de Riberera's Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew (*Open Arts Journal, 2017), p. 122

[13] Han Xiao, *Collection of the facistic atrocities of the Troops 731 of the Japanese Army*, (Historical sources of the province Heilongjiang, 1986), pp. 20-21

[14] p. 55

sharpener. Bartholomew ‘looks to the heavens’ as if asking for easing of the upcoming pain.[15] Dark backgrounds enhance the contrast between light and shade. His body emits light as if coming from within, his light in the darkness is hope for humanity to find light in the darkness, and to find light in one’s dark soul. This light may shine on torturers if they dedicate themselves to it. The chosen subject allowed the master to display his ‘skill at painting human skin, at conveying the emotions and terror felt by Bartholomew, and also the reality of the execution method’. Bray, the co-curator of the exhibition on Ribera suggests: “the way the executioners perform the ritual, as if they are butchers going about their daily task”.[16] The two torturers not only look remarkably similar themselves but also to the one holding the leg of the saint in the previous painting, alluding to the fact that the face of evil has only one face and one appearance.

All paintings discussed in this essay differ in terms of the approach to the scene. However, all of them share one underlining truth: for every human being it is a challenge to keep the inner equilibrium. Most of the time malevolence as part of what Jung called the ‘shadow’ outweighs its opposite. The world can be compared to a dark room with a few candles scattered on the floor. It is difficult to balance the darkness with light. It is not only St Bartholomew, who shines the saintly light and forgives his executioners, but Jusepe de Ribera managed to establish this equilibrium too using chiaroscuro. As Karl Marx famously put it: “The only antidote to mental suffering is physical pain”. In this context, in order not to suffer atrocities, humanity has to balance the good and evil, like a balance of light and dark tones as part of Ribera’s chiaroscuro.

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[15] Ben Luke

[16] Jose da Silva, “Under the skin of Jusepe de Ribera’s ‘extreme violence’ at the Dulwich Picture Gallery”, *The Art Newspaper,* <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/preview/dulwich-picture-gallery-gets-under-the-skin-of-ribera-s-extreme-violence>, [accessed 11 December 2018]

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Han Xiao, *Collection of the facistic atrocities of the Troops 731 of the Japanese Army*, (Historical sources of the province Heilongjiang, 1986)

Fig 1, Apollo and Marsyas (1637), Jusepe de Ribera., Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte

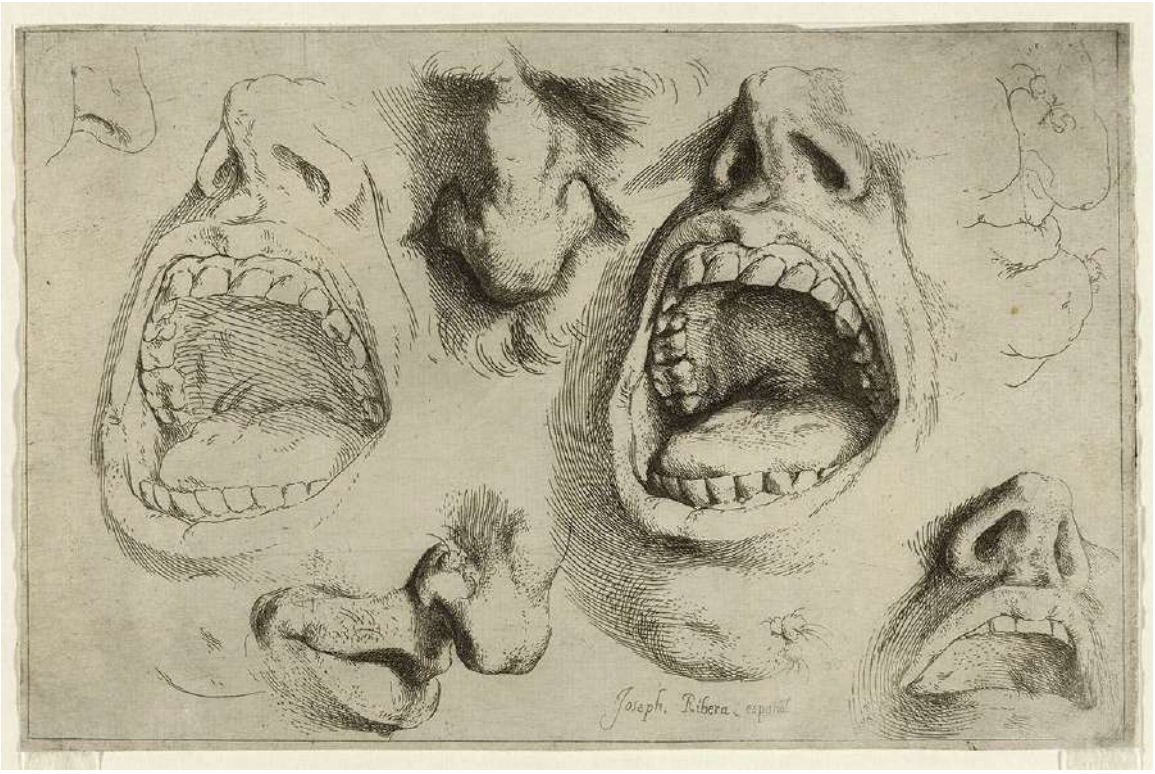

Fig 2, Studies of the Nose and Mouth (c. 1622), Jusepe de Ribera. The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig3, Marco Zoppo, The Severed Head of Saint John the Baptist

Fig 4, Andrea Mantegna, *Christ as the Suffering Redeemer*
1485, Kunst museum

Fig 5, Figure 8 Jusepe de Ribera, The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.

Fig 6, Jusepe de Ribera, The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, (chain like)

Fig 7Jusepe de Ribera, The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, (a cross)

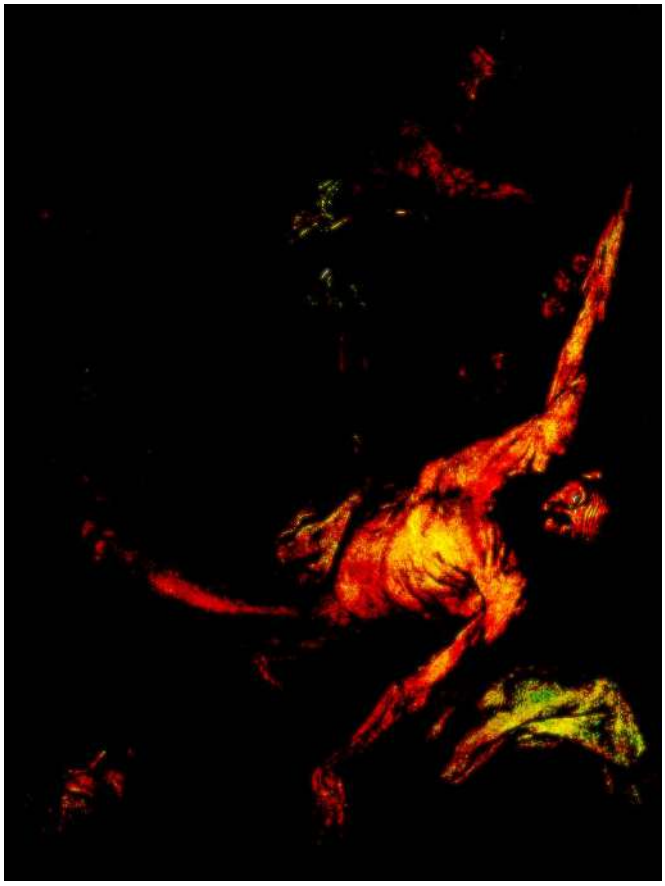

Fig 8, Jusepe de Ribera, The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, (deliberately altered)

Fig 9, *Sir Peter Paul Rubens, Venus, Mars and Cupid (circa 1630-1635). Oil on canvas,* suites at Dulwich Picture Gallery

Fig 10, Jordan Eagles, “Blood Preserved in Plexiglass Embodies Life and Death” *April 2018*, My Modern Metropolis

Fig 11, Jusepe de Ribera, Apollo flaying Marsyas, 1637, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.