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sovereignty and sacrifice in hunger *and the* dialectic of enlightenment

In a speech delivered in Belfast on 5 March 1981, Margaret Thatcher famously remarked: "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence."[1] The visceral and deeply moving portrait of Bobby Sands – the first of the ten men who starved themselves to death in their struggle for "political status" in the infamous Maze Prison – in Steve McQueen's critically acclaimed movie *Hunger* provides an excellent exposition of the untruth of Thatcher's statement.[2]

In *Hunger*, we are dragged into the prison of a liberal-democratic state, a prison where the only law is the sovereign will, performing and reproducing itself through the security forces' labor of intimidation and vengeful violence. This sovereign will is donned with the legitimacy of the law, but the law now appears like a bad copy of itself, a broken façade that scarcely hides the duel between an existing sovereign in whose hands it is used to criminalize, discredit, and thereby neutralize its opponents, on the one side, and a movement whose violent struggle for national liberation is no less than its own law, on the other. And yet, even with the help of special legislation directed at terrorism – one of the pioneers of the kind that has come to define securitized states in the post-September 11 world – the mighty sovereign is able to punish but unable to discipline. The violent clash of the wills takes on a decidedly corporeal form in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the high-security prison, movingly depicted by *Hunger*, where the contrast between the repetitive violence of the forces "upholding" the law and the self-destructive resistance of those "breaking" it is soon revealed to be the reversal of what is political and what is criminal. Unable to bend the prisoners to its own will, the state folds back upon and criminalizes itself, in the face of the moral and political indictment put forth by the violent self-destruction of the prisoners themselves. If *Hunger* thereby chronicles how sovereignty and democracy enter into a frontal collision in the conditions of the high-security prison, its immanent critique of British politics raises the question of whether it is not democracy that thereby self-destructs with the hunger strike and eventual death of its political prisoners.

While the movie centers on what McQueen calls "*the* most important event in British history in recent times,"[3] it actually speaks to the present: it stages a principled intervention into our political landscape where the question

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of hunger strikes hovers as urgently as ever, hailing most notably (but not only) from Guantánamo Bay Prison. As of 1 May 2013 (at the time of writing), 100 of the 166 prisoners held under "indefinite detention" have been starving themselves.[4] Unlike the Maze Prison, however, no death by self-starvation occurs in Guantánamo.[5] This is because prisoners are continually resuscitated by nonconsensual medical intervention, most notoriously by the insertion of nasal feeding tubes while they are tied to restraint chairs.[6] Even though Obama has publicly disowned Guantánamo, in contradistinction to the late Thatcher's position on the Maze Prison, he has not kept his long-standing promise to close the prison and has turned a blind eye to the violation of international human rights laws as well as the global ethical standards of medical practice that condemn forced feeding as "cruel, humiliating, and degrading treatment."[7]

Guantánamo may be the most conspicuous example of the "liberal" exceptions taken from fundamental human rights, but it is hardly the only one. "Special" prisons and detainment centers have proliferated around the globe, a proliferation which lends evidence to the thesis that exceptional regimes – perpetuated through executive decrees, counter-insurgency tactics, or the outright suspension of liberties as part of counterterrorism measures – are fast becoming recurrent and normalized, if not constitutive, features of liberal-democratic states.[8] In parallel, hunger striking has become a recurrently utilized form of resistance as part of an emergent necropolitical repertoire of struggle.[9] Regrettably, the experience of Irish political prisoners continues to hold important resonance for the present, exposing the dark side of liberal-democratic states that can no longer be written off as exceptions.[10] *Hunger*, therefore, is not only about Bobby Sands; it is about the hunger strikers of our time whose names we do not even know.

sovereignty and sacrifice

If the immediate political resonance of *Hunger* does not exhaust its power, it is because the movie, as a genuine work of art, calls for deeper philosophical reflection. Its stunning beauty, due as much to McQueen's keen aesthetic as it is to the excellent performance of Michael Fassbender in his role as Bobby Sands, augments the force of what I take to be the movie's most central question: how far are we willing to go in order to dominate, how far in order to be free? *Hunger* thus speaks to a nexus defined not only by the lavish excesses of securitized state sovereignty but also by the quest for freedom and the role of sacrifice in the struggle for its attainment. Embedding us in a life-and-death struggle, it forces us to reconsider the meaning and implications, the potentialities and limitations of our agency, especially when that agency takes a sacrificial form.

Indeed, *Hunger* is a movie about sacrifice as much as it is about sovereignty, but it would be wrong to conclude that it is unequivocal in its approach to either. The movie does not equate the critique of the British state with an unquestioned espousal of the Provisional IRA, nor does it abstain from depicting the human tragedy involved in the everyday enactments of the claim to sovereignty from either side. With great attention to the complexity of the conflict, the movie chooses to depict it through individuals on opposing sides: both the prison guards and the prisoners emerge as non-identical to the roles that their structural positions in the asymmetry of power relations require them to play. On the one hand, the prison guards who are the laborers of the state's security apparatus are themselves without security; they live in fear of their lives. Meanwhile, they have to dehumanize the prisoners in order to brutalize them on a recurrent basis, but they too lose something of their humanity in the process.[11] On the other hand, the prisoners in the Dirty Protest, living in the midst of bodily excrements and smearing their shit on the cell walls, reduce themselves to "animality" in order to reclaim their human dignity.[12] Meanwhile, they, too, must bear the cost of their claim to sovereignty, which comes most painfully through the protracted labor of dying they carry out on the hunger strike. However, it is worth noting that while pointing

to the shared humanity of the prisoner and the prison guard, McQueen nevertheless avoids "repeating liberal humanism's common mistake of flattening the differences in power relations."[13] *Hunger* thereby sustains an uneasiness until the very end, which amplifies its powerful effect.

Like its equivocity to sovereignty, the movie is far from an unhesitating endorsement of sacrifice in the struggle for freedom. While the sympathies of the movie toward the prisoners' cause is clear, *Hunger* is far from being a work of political propaganda aiming for a crude glorification of self-destruction.[14] Despite its realistic conveyance of the conditions of the high-security prison, the movie avoids presenting the decision of the prisoners to go on hunger strike as an inevitable outcome, and more transparent and obvious than it actually is. *Hunger* makes room for agency; in fact, an uninterrupted twenty-two-minute sequence in the middle of the movie stages a heated conversation between Bobby Sands and a West Belfast priest (played skillfully by Liam Cunningham), in which Sands gives an account of the moral and political reasons for embarking on this journey of self-destruction, defends his decision against the priest's effort to convince him to negotiate with the British government instead (which, not incidentally, is also the position of the outside leadership of the Provisional IRA), and presents a rebuttal of criticisms. One does not have to agree with Sands' reasoning to understand that his decision is a well-contemplated and difficult one, made with the knowledge of its consequences and the awareness that there is little chance of its success. If the priest's refusal to support the fast unto death does not cast sufficient doubt on the movie's championship of sacrifice, its final part, which follows Sands in the painful corporeal deterioration of his last days, most certainly does. As the director puts it: "In the end we are alone with one man, living out his last days in the most extreme manner possible – but only one decision away from choosing to surrender and live. The simplest physical action becomes an odyssey."[15] Indeed, the award-winning movie, co-authored by McQueen and Enda Walsh, goes a long way in courageously and thoughtfully portraying the wealth of troubling moral, personal, and political dilemmas and difficulties that surround the choice of pursuing self-destructive acts in political struggle, without necessarily lionizing or vilifying the endeavor, and they should be commended for this achievement.[16]

As the hunger strike takes Sands to the limits of biological existence, it also provides an implicit commentary on the liberal foundations of the Western political imaginary, which, centered on the presupposition of the primacy of self-preservation, sustains a deep contradiction with self-sacrifice. This tension is most forcefully recognized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who present it as a fundamental tenet of civilization as such, in their renowned *Dialectic of Enlightenment:*

> [t]he history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice. In other words: the history of renunciation. Everyone who practices renunciation gives away more of his life than is given back to him: and more than the life that he vindicates.[17]

Stated differently, the predicament of civilization is precisely that the way to sublate the contradiction between self-preservation and self-sacrifice is the condemnation of everyone to a system of perpetual repression in which the renunciations made to stay alive outweigh the benefits. Self-destructive protest challenges this imaginary based on renunciation because it shifts the dictum that life is the highest value toward the question of what kind of life is worth living.

From this perspective, *Hunger* shares a significant commonality with Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Both advance a strong critique of the enlightened Western civilization and its consequences. They do so by redefining civilization on the basis of the constitution of subjectivity in a dual process of subjectification and subjection, which they situate in the entwinement of sovereignty and sacrifice. Both works, I would like to argue, problematize the sacrificial subjectivity of enlightenment and its instrumental

rationality while they also interrogate the conceptions of time that go into their making.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus' adventures, and especially his encounter with the Sirens, can be read as a formative moment for the constitution of the identity of the modern subject because they point to the entanglement of myth and reason: myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to myth. Homer's *Odyssey* is an epic whose structure forebodes the very dialectic of enlightenment; it sketches out how freedom from the domination of nature creates new forms of domination that are destructive to the self and others. With *Hunger*, the odyssey of Bobby Sands can be read as a modern epic, which skillfully situates our contemporary moment within the dialectic of enlightenment. If the high-security prison can be read as the political culmination of the self-destructive tendency of enlightenment, wherein democratic sovereignty's promise of liberation from arbitrary and violent domination has become a new form of domination, self-destructive resistance emerges not only as a response to this domination but also as the interruption of the dialectic itself. The figure of Sands is the dialectical reversal of the figure of Odysseus, supplanting the sacrificial subjectivity of enlightenment with one that is re-constituted by *insurgent* sacrifice.

Reading Horkheimer and Adorno's excursus on Odysseus in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* together with McQueen's *Hunger*, my intention is to draw attention to the ways in which modern subjectivity – a philosophical problem common to both works and central to furthering the critical project of reason – is being politically challenged and reconfigured in the present. In this light, I want to pose *Hunger* as a response to the enlightenment narrative proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno, one that not only validates their observations but also points to some of their limitations. Such a reading takes art seriously as an independent grounding for the self-critique of reason and attends to how the aesthetic can bring into sharp focus the political contradictions of the present and their implications for liberation.

critiquing enlightenment

In their formidable and controversial work, Horkheimer and Adorno begin from a simple yet crushing observation regarding the relationship of reason and power; namely, that while the process of humanity's enlightenment by the use of reason contains the ambition to dissolve domination (or, at the very least, to question and unsettle the supremacy of those who wield power and reveal the precarity of their power), it acts as the handmaiden of power instead, which reduces the masses to passivity and blind obedience. This observation, aiming to make sense of the experience of fascism and subject its technological-instrumental rationality to critique, is based on the view that fascism is not an aberration of enlightenment, an exception from its otherwise liberating course, but rather internal to its development. Expressed more sharply, fascism is nothing less than the culmination of enlightenment's course and an index of its self-destruction.

Horkheimer and Adorno define enlightenment as the process by which men are liberated from fear and transformed into sovereign subjects (sovereign over nature, both external to them and their own). In order to avoid being subjected to the forces of nature, humanity learns how to dominate nature but denies and subjugates its own nature in the process.[18] Enlightenment proceeds with the acquisition of knowledge and the dissolution of myth, but that knowledge, while it allows freedom from fear, does not necessarily bring justice.[19] Instead, the mastery of nature and other "men" in the service of self-preservation now becomes the ultimate end imposed by domination and a new source of subjection.[20] The reversal of sovereignty to subjugation is the reversal of enlightenment to myth. Rationality becomes deeply engulfed in myth even as it tries to escape from and destroy it.[21] This dual character of enlightenment defines a dialectic between liberation and domination in the maelstrom of which the subject is forged into being. As reason attempts to dominate nature, within and without, through struggle and labor, it helps construct a unified self. It is not just

that subjectification proceeds hand in hand with subjection, however. It also prostrates its bearer, irrevocably transforming the self toward something less that it could be – mutilating, sacrificing, damaged and damaging, leaving behind it a trail of unrealized hopes and disappointments.

The reason for the overarching pessimism of the text has generally been attributed to the implicit negative teleology that informs the reconstruction of enlightenment as culminating in "totalitarian capitalism." Horkheimer and Adorno's radical critique of rationality, it has been argued, especially by Jürgen Habermas, not only overlooks the achievements of modernity in scientific knowledge, universalism, democracy, and aesthetics but also puts forth a reductive understanding of modernity itself. Habermas maintains: "The critical ability to take a 'yes' or 'no' stand, to be able to distinguish between what is valid and invalid, is *undercut* by the unfortunate fusion of power and validity claims."[22] Horkheimer and Adorno's conflation of power and validity claims, or reduction of reason to instrumental rationality, also undermines the text's ability to ground its own criticism in reason. The "totalizing critique" put forth by Horkheimer and Adorno in "their blackest, most nihilistic book," Habermas asserts, "turns against reason as the foundation of its own analysis."[23] Habermas considers this aporia problematic because it ignores the "rational content of cultural modernity," which Horkheimer and Adorno's critique takes for granted even as they indict reason for its complicity with domination.[24] If the distinction between power and reason is obfuscated, asks Habermas, how can reason retain a critical potential that can be used for an analysis of itself – is it not always-already part of power? In a similar way, Seyla Benhabib argues, if domination is built into the structure of Western reason, "then the theory of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which is carried out with the tools of this very same reason, perpetuates the structure of domination it condemns."[25]

While Habermas is right to insist on the necessity of critique to account for its own conditions of possibility, he also recognizes that the aporetic qualities of the text do not necessarily render Horkheimer and Adorno's critique invalid. For it is precisely the ability of the text to operate in such a "performative contradiction,"[26] one that Habermas himself notes, which enables it to provide a critique of an unreasonable truth by recourse to reason – thereby locating the contradiction in the conditions that give rise to their critique – and to call for a necessary self-reflection of enlightenment.[27] The problem hinges, at least in part, on whether or not Horkheimer and Adorno consider the process of self-destruction that they find in enlightenment's trajectory to be inevitable. There are many moments in this text that warrant such an interpretation and Habermas is certainly not alone in taking that to be the text's ultimate position.[28] However, there is also much to suggest in the text that it is Horkheimer and Adorno's goal to salvage enlightenment from itself, for example, when the authors write: "If enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate."[29] In this light, Richard J. Bernstein argues that despite the pessimism regarding enlightenment, Adorno's thought contains a utopian promise, "the vision of a nonantagonistic, nonhierarchial, nonviolent, and nonrepressive society."[30] Such a hope perhaps also sheds light on the risk that Horkheimer and Adorno have taken in occupying that aporetic position Habermas underscores, as a gesture that attempts to bring enlightenment's self-destructive process to a halt by critical reflection whose grounding is precarious, if not altogether dubious.

As Benhabib points out, the way Horkheimer and Adorno navigated this paradox was an appeal to the logic of non-identity, which could be found in the aesthetic.[31] Indeed, the aesthetic constituted a refuge for the critique of rationality in which one could (hope to) escape the complicity of reason in its own demise.[32] According to Horkheimer and Adorno, art is the only form in which the past can be rescued without being reduced to an instrument of progress: "The compulsion to rescue what is gone as what is living instead of

using it as the material of progress was appeased only in art, to which history itself appertains as a presentation of past life."[33] This recuperative dimension of Adornian aesthetics provides the possibility of a memory of the past against the progressive historical narrative of enlightenment. It also provides the possibility of enlightenment's self-critique.[34]

A different way to approach the text's pessimism, then, one enabled by art, is to disentangle its implicit negative teleology from a story of the "fall." When Horkheimer and Adorno read Odysseus as the "prototype of the bourgeois individual,"[35] they clearly suggest that the modern subject is no less immune to the struggle between reason and myth than its prehistoric counterpart might have been. Homer's text, which the authors call the "basic text of European civilization," offers "eloquent testimony of the mutual implication of enlightenment and myth," an implication that lies at the origin of Western civilization and continues to characterize it.[36] If they thereby oppose the conventional, progressive, and triumphalist enlightenment narrative that posits the ultimate overcoming of myth by reason, they do not necessarily suggest demise as the inevitable *telos* of this process. In fact, the authors unsettle the very conception of a "golden age" that lies at the *origin* of civilization when they take away the classical world as a safe haven. Instead, they posit the classical world as a premonition of the catastrophes to come.[37] At the same time, they put into question the necessity of history's unfolding toward catastrophe. It is their polemical intent, according to Susan Buck-Morss, that animates the juxtaposition of ancient Greece to the "most barbaric, most irrational phenomena of the present," a juxtaposition which sought to "demythologize the present and the past's hold over it."[38] Horkheimer and Adorno construct a genealogy of the subject that stretches the limits of a historiography that claims fidelity to facts, but they do so in order to expose what they see as a fundamental truth; namely, that the history of the formation of modern subjectivity, which is dependent on the dialectic of enlightenment in which it is forged, is a story of unfulfilled promises rather than that of the "fall." In this dialectic, there is room for contingency. But contingency depends on the struggles for freedom that, not having been successful, wait as ever-present potentialities even though they are relegated to history. The problem for the critical theorist, then, "is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past."[39]

If this interpretation is correct, then Horkheimer and Adorno's text not only leaves the door open for change but also gestures to indicate a way to achieve it. Their work teaches the necessity of recuperating the emancipatory promise of enlightenment, but it also performs this teaching by engaging in a reading that crisscrosses different temporalities, interweaving the present and the past. For Horkheimer and Adorno, Homer's *Odyssey* sheds light on *their* present while the present casts a new light on the past.[40] In Christopher Rocco's words,

> [t]heir strategy thus works in two directions at once: it aims to free us from a reified present in which political and economic structures of domination appear natural and it works against any nostalgic return to a falsely idealized past.[41]

The tragedies of the authors' present allows them to excavate the past for opportunities missed and potentialities lying dormant, which in turn help unsettle the conclusion that what has become was predestined and cannot be changed. Repeating their gesture, as it were, we can theorize the predicaments of subjectivity today through a similar practice of a *transtemporal* reading, but this time through the mediation of their text. Horkheimer and Adorno's method may allow us to understand that the self-destructive reconfiguration of modern subjectivity in the forceps of domination is not the end but an attempt to realize the unfulfilled promise of freedom. In this reading, the aesthetic continues to provide a fruitful, engaging site for grounding critical reflection. However, as I hope to show, the refuge of art is bound to remain inadequate and utopian if it cannot address political forms of resistance to domination.

sacrificial subject and sovereign time

It is well known that Horkheimer and Adorno situate sacrifice at the heart of the Odyssean journey to constitute the self. The struggle with myth is fundamentally asymmetric and dangerous; the self is always less powerful than the frightening mythical powers that threaten to destroy it. Sacrifice becomes a form of exchange with the mythical powers and gods because it grants the possibility of self-preservation.[42]

Crucial to the process of subjectification through sacrifice is the element of deceit embedded within the exchange relation characterized by asymmetry. Deception, Horkheimer and Adorno point out, is a rational survival strategy: it allows the subject to exercise agency from a position of powerlessness before the gods. Odysseus' success depends on his ability to "outwit" the gods through the very medium of exchange that honors them. His cunning depends, in turn, on the calculability of sacrifice. Appeasing the gods with gifts is not only to acknowledge their power but also to demand something in return, such as protection, which turns the gift into a calculated act. If the gods accept the sacrifice, they confirm their divine status before which the individual has bowed in recognition; however, by that very acceptance, they have also been cajoled into serving the individual's ends, especially the end of self-preservation. Horkheimer and Adorno argue: "All human sacrifices, when systematically executed, deceive the god to whom they are made: they subject him to the primacy of human ends, and dissolve his power."[43]

The element of calculation within the act of sacrifice exposes sacrifice in its essential character: a relation of exchange, a contract. An exchange of equivalents is never completely equal; however, when this exchange is embedded within a structural asymmetry, the power differential among the parties of the exchange cannot but vitiate any semblance of equality. And yet, in that very inequality, deceit carves a space of reversal and implodes the sacrificial contract from within. Calculation within the sacrificial relation provides a way to overturn the asymmetry because it injects a logic that tries to salvage what is commensurate to or more than what is being forgone in the exchange. "By calculating his own sacrifice, [Odysseus] effectively negates the power to whom the sacrifice is made. In this way he redeems the life he had forfeited."[44]

Horkheimer and Adorno make it clear that while Odysseus renders the element of deception in sacrifice more visible, he neither invents nor exhausts it. In drawing a historical line stretching from the immortality attributed to the deified victim in ancient rituals of human sacrifice, whose blood is to flow back into the community as some form of primordial energy, to the sacrifice of individuals to modern collectivities, especially in warfare, Horkheimer and Adorno posit deception as integral to sacrifice. However, while in the first case the gods are being outwitted, in the latter case it is the individuals who are being outwitted by the state, which has become the new god. And yet modern sacrifice need not be fatal; it takes on subtler forms. The struggle to free oneself from bondage to nature becomes a struggle that leads to one's own bondage in the form of self-denial, sublimation, and repression. Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the domination of the self in the effort to master nature and others becomes destructive of the subject; it destroys what it is supposed to preserve. The path laid out by domination is a sacrificial contract that has outlasted its necessity; upholding the contract, originally intended to protect life, becomes its own rationale. The irrationality of domination reaches its extreme point with "totalitarian capitalism" – in order to uphold it, one must go down the path that leads to the "extermination of mankind."[45] In the regulated, rationalized form of sacrifice that is constantly demanded by the system – a mastered and "masterful" renunciation – deceit is now directed to the self. It is those thus dominated who are being cheated by the new god, and "the subjected repeat upon themselves the injustice that was done to them, enacting it again in order to endure it."[46]

Horkheimer and Adorno locate a turning point in the development of the cunning of reason in Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens, whose temporality is revealing and constitutive. This encounter takes place in "mythic time," the temporality characterized by repetition for the mythical powers – the Sirens must lure every traveler – and the suspension of ordinary time for the mortals. Repetition is the curse that the Sirens cannot break, but it also lies at the source of their lure.[47] Deceit is in the Sirens' offer when they act as the voice of history: they deliver the knowledge of the past but at the expense of the future, for "the promise of the happy return is the deception with which the past ensnares the one who longs for it."[48] Their temporality is that of sovereignty; they control time. By contrast, Odysseus has little in the way of his own temporality; that is why his adventures are spatially, rather than temporally, separated and serialized through the image of voyaging or wandering. Where "historical time is detached from space" and suspended, Odysseus is subject to the Sirens' temporality as much as he is subject to their lure: "their allurement is that of losing oneself in the past."[49]

The song of the Sirens, dangerous as it is beautiful, is Odysseus' test of subjectification, of achieving the internal development of the self-preserving, centered, and instrumentally rational subject of enlightenment. Mythical time requires that the subject has no independent relation with history but loses itself in the suspension of temporality in which the mythical powers can endlessly repeat and reproduce themselves. However, Odysseus' emancipation from myth relies on the transformation of nature into history. Thus, while he can entertain the knowledge he has acquired from the past to ensure his survival, he cannot tolerate the appeal of a return to what has passed.[50] Odysseus must dissociate the past from the present and the present from the future, grounding the unity of his nascent self in the "now." His success requires a narrative of history as progressive rationalization and instrumental knowledge – otherwise the memory of natural history is strong enough to engulf the subject. The fear of subjection to nature lingers in the definition of civilization.[51] It is the remainder that cannot be subsumed into civilization, nor can it be destroyed.

Sacrifice appears in dual form in the solutions for escaping the lure of the Sirens' song. Either their song must not be heard at all or a way must be found to resist its temptation. Odysseus finds the first solution fit for the laborers on his ship. Because their ears are waxed, the oarsmen are left to labor in silence and submission to Odysseus' will, without any conflict between the Sirens' lure, their own desires, and the rationality of self-preservation. The deceit in their sacrifice is simple: in order to avoid being engulfed by nature, they agree to submit themselves to the domination of sovereignty. For the oarsmen, sovereignty takes on a dominant, repetitive temporality, which brings survival at the cost of not only their freedom but also the knowledge and experience of the Sirens' song. The second solution is for Odysseus who has himself bound to the mast of the ship while he listens to the Sirens. Even though he tries to cast off his bonds once he hears the song, he struggles in vain since the oarsmen cannot hear him either. Here, the conflict between desire and reason is resolved by a different sacrifice, one that is more controlled and calculated. In yielding to the power of the Sirens, or displaying only a rationalized resistance, Odysseus "has found an escape clause in the contract, which enables him to fulfill it while eluding it. The primeval contract does not provide for the possibility of the seafarer listening bound or unbound to the bewitching voices."[52] Cunning means taking charge of one's own subjugation not only for safe passage but also for the advantageous use of knowledge and the enjoyment of the Sirens' song. If the oarsmen's sacrifice is their submission to Odysseus' will and to repetitive labor, Odysseus' sacrifice is subduing his instincts to the discipline of instrumental reason, or giving up the nature in himself in order to dominate nature and the oarsmen. Odysseus thus internalizes and re-rationalizes sacrifice; it becomes a controlled "renunciation" that appears to neutralize his subjection. This is

also the appropriation and internalization of a sovereign temporality of repetition, ensuring the fixity of time for the emergent subject. Cunning thus allows Odysseus to navigate the asymmetric relation of exchange and transform the inevitability represented by the power of myth to his own advantage: "his rationality necessarily assumes a restrictive form – *that of an exception*."[53] As Odysseus takes exception from myth, he embarks on the path that renders the *exceptional* form of rationality the *rule* of enlightenment.

This encounter is symptomatic for showing how deceit used toward the goal of self-preservation vis-à-vis nature ends up eating away at the subject's own nature, deceiving the deceiver in the process. The domination achieved through this very denial or the internalization of sacrifice renders Odysseus the figure of the *sacrificial* subject. This subjectivity is constituted through a dialectic between nature and history, a dialectic in which sovereignty over nature is achieved through the negation of human nature as part of nature, and sovereignty over time is achieved through a controlled and self-imposed subjection of desire. Odysseus' submission to renunciation defies the truth of the subject's hard-earned sovereignty, implicating him in the logic of "equivalent" exchange, which entails the preservation of life by forgoing a *fulfilling* life. After all, "the annulment of death," argue Horkheimer and Adorno, "constitutes the very core of all antimythological thinking."[54] Consequently, the song of the Sirens can be heard for what it really is: the *mythical interpellation of the sacrificial subject into a sovereign subject*. In this light, we can understand Horkheimer and Adorno as presenting a compelling critique of sovereignty, in which domination over nature and others is always-already domination over oneself. The dialectic of enlightenment is a dialectic of sovereignty and sacrifice in which:

> Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken; for the substance which is dominated, suppressed, and dissolved by virtue of self-preservation is none other than this very life as functions of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and determination: it is, in fact, what is to be preserved.[55]

hunger's siren song

Odysseus listens to the Sirens' song while he is bound to the mast, but his cunning attempt to overcome its lure results in the neutralization of the aesthetic that is thereby transformed into a mere source of pleasure rather than a way of experiencing the world. However, against the self-destructiveness of enlightenment and the reversal of reason to myth, true art is the source of a redemptive critique.[56] According to Robert Hullot-Kentor:

> In art, domination is able to become liberation, the truth of the whole, because the same process of the domination of nature that society carries out occurs within the art work; the same sacrificial act of reason is carried out by art through its construction … However, whereas the sacrifices required by self-preservative reason in the actual domination of nature are silenced by the semblance of necessity woven by the principle of identity, art mourns the sacrifices it carries out.[57]

McQueen's *Hunger* is precisely such a work, which offers sensory experience as a critical perspective from which to evaluate the dialectic of enlightenment and the non-identical as a refusal to forget what is sacrificed. It offers knowledge of the past not as a practical tool of self-preservation in the present but as the reminder of a moment of unfulfilled promise, as the constituent element of a memory against history as well as a form of mourning of loss. The movie can therefore be interpreted as an engaged response to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of modernity, which it shares and advances. Like the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Hunger* attends to the dialectical constitution of modern subjectivity and problematizes instrumental rationality. Similarly, it transtemporally gestures to unsettle the present by salvaging a precious moment of the past from oblivion,

without, however, overlooking its contradictions or idealizing it. However, just as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* enables us to arrive at a new appreciation of *Hunger*, the movie also enables us to point to some limitations of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis.

The figure of Bobby Sands as depicted in *Hunger* presents a strong contrast to the figure of Odysseus as interpreted by Horkheimer and Adorno. Odysseus hears the Sirens' song, but he cannot let himself listen freely. He is interpellated as a sovereign subject, but the cost of his sovereignty is his ongoing renunciation. On the other hand, Sands, too, hears the Sirens' song, but not only does he listen to it, he also lets himself be taken by it, by transforming his renunciation into self-destruction. If Odysseus is the allegory for the constitution of the modern sacrificial subject defined by instrumental reason, Sands can be read as its fruition, inversion, and ultimate destruction. Sands' interpellation by the Sirens' song in order to redeem the unfulfilled promise of freedom from domination radicalizes sacrifice and turns it against the self. However, the destruction of the logic of domination based on a regime of renunciation for the sake of survival is only possible through the destruction of Odysseus. Sands is the self-destruction of Odysseus, whose advantageous contract with sovereignty implodes to reclaim a free subjectivity.

The distance between the two figures can be found in Sands' account of a childhood moment when he ventured deep into the woods with a group of friends while preparing for a cross-country race. In the woods, they encountered a little foal in pain with a broken leg. The other children deliberated what to do without doing anything. Sands tells how he drowned the foal, exactly at the moment when they were seen by one of the priests, who reprimanded them for the death of the foal. Sands takes the blame in everyone's name. The lesson is clear: in order to alleviate the suffering of others, he will act without fearing its consequences. If Sands' encounter with the foal is a test of subjectification, a challenge he must overcome to become the self that he is, it already indicates the possibility of a different pathway than the cunning of Odysseus. Sands' actions are not about outwitting the powers that threaten him but silently confronting the challenge, taking moral responsibility, and suffering the repercussions of his actions. Subjectification is not centered on self-preservation but on putting an end to suffering and the preservation of friends.

The contrast between Sands and Odysseus becomes most vivid in the prison encounter. Here, the struggle for subjectivity is no longer about the conquest of an external nature. Unlike the *Odyssey* where nature remains the unconquered "other" of civilization, in *Hunger* we are deep in the bowels of civilization, in a "civilized" prison where domination has become *second nature*. The mythical powers that Odysseus struggled against have mutated into the "enlightened domination" of the sovereignty of the state. Nature's mythical powers are no longer a threat to the survival of the self but nature is a source of freedom from civilization. On the one hand, an idealized nature naively protrudes into the movie with the suffering foal, the fly that visits the prisoner's cell, the rat that accompanies the prison guard smoking in the yard, and the birds that fly away to signify Sands' eventual yielding to death. McQueen's projection of freedom on nature, juxtaposed against civilization as the index of humanity's alienation from itself, appears curiously romanticized and nostalgic from the perspective afforded by Horkheimer and Adorno. On the other hand, *Hunger* recuperates its critical perspective when it turns to depict how human nature already objectified and colonized by civilization can be turned back against civilization in the form of resistance to domination: in the naked bodies that refuse clothing themselves in prison uniforms, the excrements that are smeared on the cell walls, the urine that is poured from the cell doors, the transformation of the body's cavities into vessels of political messages, and the sustained refusal of food. Just as the most basic corporeal functions of human nature become objects of oppression, they can be reversed into the means of resistance against oppression. Radicalized self-domination in the form of the repression of the desire to eat is forged into a weapon against the domination

of the state. Nature is once again pitted against civilization, but now as the source of its internal or self-critique and the possibility of its transformation.

If *Hunger* thereby charts the dialectic of subjectivity suggested by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it attends to what Horkheimer and Adorno tend to overlook: resistance. *Hunger* situates the present as part of this dialectic but draws upon resistance to show how the dialectic can be interrupted: the modern self built on the renunciation of nature can radicalize renunciation into self-sacrifice. It does so not only by its transtemporal gesture to critique the present but also by interweaving different temporalities within the movie, temporalities that resonate with those of Odysseus. The temporality of sovereignty is chronicled in the movie's first part through the juxtaposition of the experience of a new prisoner and the prison guard who enter into the same prison. This is time organized, regulated, and dominated by the power of the state. Ordinary time is suspended. The only evidence of the passing of time for the prisoners is the rhythm of recurrent beatings, forced haircuts and baths, cavity searches.[58] The prison guard's recurrent relief from the beatings he gives to the prisoners by soaking his bruised knuckles in water shows how the guards' labor is subject to the same rhythmic organization of time. Both the prisoners and the guards are rooted in the "now," without any real connection to the past or the future. Like the "mythic time" in the *Odyssey*, sovereign time is abstract and detached, and characterized by compulsory repetition. Only, the power of the Sirens has now been supplanted by Odyssean sovereignty – Odysseus' ability to achieve domination over myth by reason has been objectified in the modern state, which reproduces itself through the repeated labor of violence.

The only way to survive this temporality is through renunciation. The prison guards must have their ears waxed and keep on rowing while the prisoners must remain tied to the mast. Like Odysseus, they must formally subject themselves to the state, recognize its laws, make compromises, do their time in submission. Their resistance must be calculated and advantageous. But there is a problem: the prisoners refuse the Odyssean strategy; they reject wearing the prison uniforms, they do not clean themselves, they rebel against the sacrificial contract with power, dictated by instrumental rationality. Already in sovereign time, or the eternal repetition of mythical violence, prisoners become non-identical with their roles, beginning to point beyond the rationalized and deceptive resistance of Odysseus toward the *refusal* of domination. The assassination of the prison guard outside of the prison marks the beginning of the end of sovereign time, by acting as the symbolic destruction of the possibility of rowing in silence for the oarsmen. It also acts as a segue way to the second part of the movie, hailed by critics as its heart – the long conversation between Sands and the priest, in which the two debate Sands' proposed course of action as resistance comes to its own by articulating its self-consciousness. This is the moment in which the historic rupture from the dominant temporality is articulated through the decision on the hunger strike unto death and its justification in political and moral terms before the tribunal of the priest. Pointing to the failure of the first hunger strike, which was called off when the government agreed to prisoner demands but never kept its promises, Sands argues that prisoners end up being cheated when they negotiate with the state. Stated differently, the controlled renunciation of the prisoners, in which they think they are utilizing the situation to their advantage, ends up in deception: it destroys the possibility of achieving their goals while it threatens to diminish, if not erase altogether, the prior work of resistance. Echoing Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the sacrificial subject symbolized in the figure of Odysseus, Sands refuses the reconciliatory line, which implies conceding to the sovereignty of the state as a strategy of renunciation in which self-preservation is bound to end up undermining the very life to be preserved. Instead of a negotiating tool for gaining leverage or concessions, the proposed hunger strike unto death is the expression of a staunch rejection to be determined and dominated by the state. This

is an absolute and *insurgent* form of sacrifice, fundamentally at odds with controlled and calculated renunciation. Regardless of its chances of success, this strategy is seen as the only way to achieve freedom. Against the priest's objection that such self-destructive action amounts to suicide, a disregard for life, Sands responds that it is necessary to lay down one's life for a *dignified* life, one lived in line with the deepest moral and political convictions. Sands argues: "My life means everything to me. Freedom means everything … Putting my life on the line is not just the only thing I can do, Dom. It's the right thing."

Sands' position thus radicalizes the critique of the sacrificial subject by proposing a break with instrumental rationality. Self-preservation no longer dominates the terms of an exchange with the powerful, in which cunning would be necessary to transform the asymmetry of the exchange from within. Since there is no "equivalent" that can be exchanged for self-imposed death, such action refuses compromise and deceit and obliterates the possibility of renunciation being translated into further domination. The subjectivity entailed by the radicalization of renunciation to the limit is an insurgent subjectivity fundamentally at odds with that of Odysseus. In *Hunger*'s temporality of the decision for resistance we therefore encounter the articulation of the desire to break free from one's bonds, not in order to ensure survival but in order to upend domination and destroy the sacrificial subjectivity brought into being in the dialectic of enlightenment. The consequences of such a decision, however, are far from clear: it can lead to the collapse of enlightenment or open an opportunity for its recuperation.

This brings us to the final part of the movie, which narrates the corporeal journey that takes Sands to his death and where a novel temporality is introduced. This temporality, radically alien to the coming into being of sovereign time that dominates Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens, is *scatological* time, the temporality of corporeal deterioration.[59] *Hunger* painfully portrays the famished body of Sands as he is slowly reduced to bed. But the material traces of self-starvation – the blood in the toilet, the vomit, the stains on the bed sheets from the ulcers of his skin, the muffling of voices, the blurring of vision – document the invisible: glimpses of a new subjectivity in defiance of the destruction of the body, in the form of an inextinguishable spirit of freedom that resists both the domination of the state and the fear of death itself. This is the temporality of refusal that, on the one hand, gestures toward an indefinite futurity, a time of ultimate redemption to come, while, on the other hand, it connects back to the past. We see a young Sands staring at his dying self and the dying Sands merging with his young self, freely running in the wilderness. The temporality of *insurgent sacrifice* breaks the cast of a partitioned time between the past, present, and future, which made possible the nascent subjectivity of enlightenment in the figure of Odysseus. In *Hunger*, these three temporalities intertwine and re-merge in a new whole, which comes to define the new self claimed through a struggle against one's former subjectivity, as well as the domination that rendered it damaged and lacking. Odysseus' price for self-preservation was continual self-denial and the introversion of sacrifice into renunciation. Sands resorts to self-destruction in order to reclaim his freedom. As the sacrificial subject of enlightenment is subverted, we encounter the flickering vision of a new subjectivity, reconfigured by the radicalization of internalized sacrifice. Insurgent self-sacrifice interrupts sovereign time, bringing the dialectic of enlightenment to a halt. In this new temporality, Odysseus is no longer bound to the mast. Sands is *Odysseus unbound*.

dialectic interrupted

Reading *Hunger* with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* allows us to arrive at a new appreciation of both works as commentaries on subjectivity in modernity as constituted by sovereignty and sacrifice. Read transtemporally alongside the "primal history of subjectivity" put forth in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the figure of Bobby Sands in *Hunger* provides a history of

the present: he emerges as the inversion of Odysseus and reveals how the subversive potentialities embedded within our subjection can be activated in a staunch resistance against domination. At the same time, he shows how the dark side of our rational self-domination involves a violence that is directed against the self, made visible by the self-imposed and willed corporeal decay of the subject, deconstructing itself as it rejects the sacrificial subjectivity of enlightenment. In contrast to the insurgent sacrifice epitomized by the figure of Sands, Odysseus of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appears as a cautionary tale of the trajectory of reason that surrenders itself to domination so absolutely in its struggle against nature and myth that its redemption comes at the cost of self-destruction.

If *Hunger* thereby pressures the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* toward its logical conclusions in bringing it to bear on our present, it also throws some of its limitations into sharp relief. While Horkheimer and Adorno are right to diagnose the self-destructive tendency in enlightenment, perpetuated by the reversal of the struggle to break free from nature into a cage of domination and repression, reproduced by asymmetries of power and calculated renunciation, their call for enlightenment to engage in critical self-reflection in order to counteract its destructive dynamic appears to be a curiously feeble solution. There are moments when self-reflection is not sufficient, both because it can remain isolated from action and because that self-reflection is also subject to the same dialectic, which tends toward its own demise. The aesthetic provides a refuge from which to criticize this self-destructive tendency, but change requires the political struggle of those subjects who are shaped by and who in turn shape that self-destructive tendency. If Horkheimer and Adorno's text is pervaded by a deep pessimism, this is also because radical resistance is absent from it. Such resistance does not completely overturn the devastating account of enlightenment proposed by the authors, but it militates against its inevitability and renews our faith in the possibility of change as well as our commitment to bring it about.

The *embodied and fatal* critique of Sands – and of those individuals in prisons and detention centers around the world whose names are much less known – resounds from those "civilized" sites in which the line between the political and the criminal is blurred to remind us that the struggle for freedom and the desire to bring domination to an end are ever present, however bleak and violent are the forms they take. This critique interrupts the dialectic of enlightenment, even if it does not eliminate it, not only by providing an opportunity of self-reflection concerning the predicaments of modern subjectivity but also actively opening new trajectories for enlightenment. As such, *Hunger* is a rejoinder to Horkheimer and Adorno, perhaps not amending their pessimism but at least showing that the self-destructive resistance of subjects who politicize life to its limits are also part of the legacy of enlightenment and its promise of liberation. It gives a nod to the later Adorno who argues that the "subject's nonidentity without sacrifice would be utopian"[60] by seeking to destroy the sacrificial subject through radicalization of sacrifice. The radical temporality of insurgent sacrifice points, however briefly, to a dignified life beyond domination but one it cannot sustain. Rather, it sings to us, lures us, and brings us to a halt, long enough that we might not just listen to the Sirens' song but begin singing our own.

notes

1 Thatcher.

2 *Hunger*, directed by Steve McQueen.

3 McQueen, "Video Interview."

4 Savage.

5 On the adoption of force-feeding not as an ad hoc but planned tactic of the Guantánamo base clinic under the guise of a discourse on the protection of life, see Anderson 1729–36.

6 See, for example, al Hasan Moqbel.

7 World Medical Association.

8 Agamben.

9 Bargu.

10 For an in-depth account, see Feldman esp. 147–217.

11 McNamee.

12 Ibid.

13 El-Khairy 191.

14 However, the movie was chided for its political sympathies. See, for example, O'Toole; Tookey.

15 McQueen, "Director's Statement" 2.

16 However, *Hunger* generated mixed responses: while celebrated for its ability to provide a truthful portrait of the dirty protest and the hunger strike, the movie was also criticized for glossing over the broader historical context of the Troubles. Cf. O'Hagan; Brown 73.

17 Horkheimer and Adorno 55.

18 For a critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of enlightenment in Homer exclusively as the attempt to master nature, which leads them to overlook the spiritual dimension, see Ruderman 138–61.

19 Horkheimer and Adorno 17.

20 Ibid. 22.

21 Ibid. 12.

22 Habermas 18. On Habermas's rift with Horkheimer and Adorno, see Hohendahl.

23 Habermas 13, 22. For a counterargument to Habermas claiming that the fragmentary structure of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* resists the charge of "totalizing critique," see Rocco 81–97.

24 Habermas 23.

25 Benhabib 1442.

26 Habermas 22.

27 Honneth captures this aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, which he calls "world-disclosing" and defends as a form warranted by a particularly "pathological" type of social disorder. See Honneth 116–27.

28 In this line, for example, Brunkhorst identifies an ambivalence in the text, which oscillates between utopian critique of domination and the rationality that is in line with it, and a fundamentalist critique, based on a metaphysical philosophy of history that presents the trajectory of enlightenment as one of decay. See Brunkhorst 133–40.

29 Horkheimer and Adorno xiii.

30 Bernstein 197.

31 Benhabib 1443.

32 Hullot-Kentor 23–44.

33 Horkheimer and Adorno 32.

34 For an insightful account on the role of art for Adorno, see Wellmer, "On the Dialectic of Modernism" 337–62.

35 Horkheimer and Adorno 43.

36 Ibid. 45–46.

37 On Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of Homer in relation to its cultural significance for the German philhellenic tradition, see Fleming 107–28.

38 Buck-Morss 61.

39 Horkheimer and Adorno xv.

40 On the allegorical dimension of their reading, see Owens. For the link between Horkheimer and Adorno's allegorical reading and that of Walter Benjamin in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, see van Reijen.

41 Rocco 77.

42 Horkheimer and Adorno 10.

43 Ibid. 50.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid. 55.

46 Ibid. 51.

47 Much has been written on the sexual identity of the Sirens, its implications for the constitution of gender relations and the patriarchal order, which I will have to sidestep in this discussion. See, for example, Comay; Salecl; Hewitt; Love.

48 Horkheimer and Adorno 33.

49 Ibid. 32.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid. 31.

52 Ibid. 59.

53 Ibid. 58; my emphasis.

54 Ibid. 76.

55 Ibid. 54–55.

56 For an interpretation that locates the emergence of self-reflexive aesthetic contemplation in Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens, see Wellmer, "Death of the Sirens" 5–19.

57 Hullot-Kentor 43.

58 According to Melvin, the sonic motifs of the movie, especially the rhythmic pulse (i.e., the banging of dustbins that opens the movie, the batons of the prison guards, the water in the sink, and the soft breathing of the hunger striker near his end), drive the narrative forward. See Melvin 26, 28, 29.

59 Feldman 165.

60 Adorno 281.

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