3. Unbearable Vulnerability: Liliana Cavani’s The Night

Porter

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Commenting on her 1973 film *The Night Porter*, Liliana Cavani stated, “Fascism is not only an event of yesterday . . . [i]t is with us still, here and elsewhere. As dreams do, my film brings back to the surface a repressed ‘history.’” The repressed “history” that emerges in *The Night Porter* is a history of shared repression in Nazi Germany. In this, Cavani’s film has much in common with Klaus Theweleit’s study of the dreams of soldiers of the German Freikorps, voluntary armies organized in the aftermath of World War I. In reference to the Nazi propensity for violence, Theweleit remarked that fascism is not an ideology but “a way of dealing with reality violently.” One might situate Cavani’s film by saying that it seeks to represent the unconscious level of shared experience behind Nazi violence.

Cavani’s investigation into “the repressed history” of fascism fittingly centers on a man who works at night—the time

of dreaming—when unconscious material comes to the mind’s surface. Max, the eponymous night porter, is a former officer in a Hungarian concentration camp. Now, in 1957, he wants to live “like a church mouse,” and so he has taken a job in a Viennese hotel that also serves as the meeting place for a group of ex-Nazi officers who had worked with him in the camp. The officers are war criminals who do not want to be put in the position of having to defend themselves before a tribunal. To evade prosecution, they hunt down and kill any surviving witnesses who could testify against them, and they destroy the Nuremberg archival records of their crimes. They also stage mock trials where they proclaim themselves cured of their “guilt complexes.”

It is in the context of Max’s own trial that Lucia, a witness to Max’s past crimes, appears. Now the wife of an American conductor, Lucia had been imprisoned in the concentration camp where Max was in the practice of impersonating a doctor in order to conduct bogus medical experiments on prisoners. He had forced the teenage Lucia into a relationship of sexual bondage. Twelve years after the war’s end, when the film begins, Lucia, accompanying her husband on a concert tour, checks into the hotel where Max is working. Max and Lucia recognize each other, and they are drawn back into a relationship. This time, Lucia becomes Max’s lover by choice. She deserts her husband, and she and Max barricade themselves inside Max’s apartment. Having abandoned his trial, and refusing to turn over his “witness,” Max is now perceived as a threat to the other members of the Nazi group, who consequently plan to assassinate Lucia and him. This is precisely what happens when hunger drives the couple out of the apartment and into the range of a waiting sniper.

Feminist critics embraced the film as a critical examination and destabilization of traditional “subject positions,” but mostly it was attacked, accused, among other things, of blurring the line between victims and perpetrators, of pornographically exploiting the victims of Nazism, and of justifying Nazism. The film was banned by Italian censors, and charges

8. To cite just some examples of the strong negative reactions the film provoked: Rebecca
were brought against Cavani on the grounds that her film depicted sexual torture.9

Perhaps one reason the film opened itself to such a polarized response is that, in terms of character development, Lucia is not presented with the same depth as Max. Throughout the film, she appears almost exclusively through the filter of Max’s vision, and as a result, she exists before the viewer only in relation to Max. By thus restricting the viewer’s knowledge of Lucia to Max’s perspective, the film calls attention to its interest not in Lucia’s experience as such, but in Max’s experience of her. In this regard the blockage of the viewer’s direct access to Lucia tells us something about Max (the viewer’s lens) and about his relationship to her.10 It indicates his inability to perceive Lucia in her own right. She occupies his mind, but only as a screen upon which he imposes the very fantasies through which the “repressed history” of fascism emerges. Through Max’s vision of Lucia, the film explores the transformation of the victims into phantasms of the fascist imaginary as well as the significance of such phantasms in the development of the “authoritarian personality.”11 By troping the victims as signifiers of the Nazi unconscious, the film reveals the affective investments of the perpetrators as they pursue a kind of psychic relief through the destruction of their signifying object.


In response to Cavani’s comment “‘We are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily. Only Sade and Dostoevsky have really understood this,’” Primo Levi wrote, “I do not know, nor does it interest me much to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim, and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.” The Drowned and the Saved, 48–49.

10. In the few scenes of Lucia in which Max is physically absent, his perspective still determines how she is portrayed.
In studies of victimization, the fluidly associated concepts of empathy, identification, and secondary witnessing as responses to narratives of trauma have been affirmed in their own right as contributing “to the moral life by making it possible for a person to respond appropriately (though counterfactually) to human need.”

It is not self-evident that inquiries into the experience of perpetration expand the moral life. Christopher Browning takes up this issue in the preface to his study of a German reserve police battalion that participated in the massacres of Polish Jews during the Holocaust. Browning writes,

[A] possible objection to this kind of study concerns the degree of empathy for the perpetrators that is inherent in trying to understand them. Clearly the writing of such a history requires the rejection of demonization. The policemen in the battalion who carried out the massacres and deportations, like the much smaller number who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognize that in the same situation, I could have been either a killer or an evader—both were human—if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive.

According to Browning, empathy is not corrupting if it expands our understanding, in human terms, of the murders. I would suggest that Cavani’s exploration of the psychological underpinnings of Nazism anticipated studies such as Browning’s, both in its willingness to find points of entry into a human phenomenon, and in its insistence that attempting to map the Nazi imaginary does not serve to exonerate the crimes of its adherents. In this latter regard the film anticipates possible critiques.

14. A desire to discourage precisely such empathy guided the organization of the materials on the perpetrators exhibited in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, whose planners had a “gnawing fear that an effective portrayal of the Nazis’ world and their industry of murder would be worse than appalling to visitors—it might be perversely fascinating as well.” Edward Linenthal, Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum (New York: Viking, 1995), 199.
on that very basis: during the mock trial at the hotel, a psychoanalytic “defense” is mounted according to which the Nazis’ guilt is rationalized as the product of a “complex.” Through this scene clearly Cavani is distancing herself from mitigating explanations of genocide.

In his discussion of the plastic and spatial expressions of the “Theater of Cruelty”—his name for “all true theatre”—Artaud notes that “true freedom is dark and infallibly identified with sexual freedom, which is also dark, although we do not know precisely why.” The Night Porter conforms to Artaud’s understanding of “true theatre” in that it expresses, in the form of a sexual relation, a life force that remains repressed under Nazism. On the most literal level, Lucia’s return is represented as an interruption of post–World War II collective German repression of responsibility for Nazi crimes; but as we will see, her return also brings into view a foreclosed need of the perpetrators to establish and maintain an attachment to their victims, notwithstanding their drive to destroy them.

Recall that for Browning, an empathic approach toward the perpetrators requires a willingness to recognize a resemblance between ourselves and them. It bears keeping in mind, however, that this resemblance remains hypothetical, insofar as it is based on the assumption of an untested potential to have been like the perpetrators, rather than on an identifiable shared characteristic or experience. The Night Porter solicits a more disarming recognition: of an actual rather than speculative point of overlap between ourselves and the perpetrators.

Cavani anchors her exploration of this shared human quality, and its repression under Nazism, in her own affinity with Max on the basis of their common interest in filmmaking. The first time the viewer sees Lucia—in a flashback to her arrival at the concentration camp—she is being filmed by Max while she stands naked in a line with other prisoners. Max’s camera aligns with Cavani’s, thereby indicating their common libidinal investment in capturing the naked Lucia through the gaze. While we do not yet know what Lucia signifies to Max, it is clear from

16. Giorgio Agamben’s thinking about how the concerns of witnesses fall outside the framework of the law is relevant to The Night Porter as well. Agamben writes: “The decisive point is simply that the two things not be blurred, that law not presume to exhaust the question. A non-juridical element of truth exists such that the quaestio facti [factual question] can never be reduced to the quaestio iuris [legal question].” Remnants of Auschwitz, 17.
the outset that Cavani shares Max’s desire to possess whatever she stands for. Since the camera within the scene and the camera recording the scene film the same view, their common vision also positions Lucia as the viewer’s libidinal object. The interpolation of the film’s audience into the Nazi position may account for the charges leveled against Cavani that she created a piece of pornography, even though the characters in the film “never undid a button, untied a bootlace.”

The film foregrounds the motif of optics and observation in relation to all of the bodies to which Max is attached, and always in a theatrical context. In addition to viewing Lucia’s naked body through a camera lens, Max watches Bert, a dancer living in the hotel, perform, while shining a stage light on him. After the dance, Max administers a shot in Bert’s exposed buttock. In a flashback to the camps, Bert wears only a loincloth as he performs before an audience of SS officers. Max watches Lucia while she attends her husband’s opera as the camera, adopting Max’s perspective, focuses on Lucia’s bare neck; Max is also audience to Lucia’s topless “cabaret” performance in the camp. Such scenes of spectatorship call attention to the privileged position of the body as the site of Max’s quest to uncover something hidden and crucial.

In an interview Cavani noted,

> The Nazis really loved the cinema and adored filming everything; they did it very well—they had some very good cameramen. A lot of the SS possessed Leicas—like the one Max has in the film: it’s a genuine 1940s Leica. They just loved filming. Everything, even the worst scenes of torture. Not just the reporters—the professionals—but all of them. It was a hobby . . . It seems to me an attempt to become more objective, to “distance” oneself from what is going on.

The Nazis’ attempt to establish distance through focus can only be in response to an unconsciously registered affinity between themselves and their objects. Such perception could more precisely be characterized as projection, for Max does not recognize Lucia in her otherness; he creates her in the image of his own “othered” or foreclosed desire.

The initial flashback to Lucia’s arrival at the camp, as well as a later flashback in which Max “playfully” shoots a gun as Lucia dodges his

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bullets in a bare room, suggest what it is that Max is trying to visualize through Lucia. In both scenes Max coerces Lucia’s vulnerability into plain sight. That vulnerability finds its counterpoint in Max, who plays the role of her protector. In one scene in the camp that mixes eroticism and nurturing, Max ministers to Lucia’s wounded arm, kissing and bandaging it (the suggestion is that he is also responsible for the injury). Max also infantilizes Lucia. Though she is a teenager, he makes her ride a carousel and has her wear an oversized bow in her hair. When she returns to Max as an adult, she buys a dress in an antiques shop that is too small for her adult frame. Taken together, these scenes suggest that Max transforms her into the image of a child, thereby associating her with a period of dependency and need of protection.

Understood as a representation of external events, the film’s plot is implausible. The dress Lucia buys is an almost exact replica of the one Max had her wear in the camps. She knows exactly where Max lives and is able to enter his apartment at will. She deserts her husband without consequence—he never returns to Vienna in search of her. What is not credible on the level of plot is, however, consistent with the power of the unconscious to summon what it desires through fantasy. In this regard the timing of Lucia’s reappearance—she arrives at the very moment when Max is “on trial” and attempting to divorce from his past—is significant. On the verge of being repressed, Max’s history suddenly returns, as Lucia. He hallucinates Lucia into existence: Standing in the empty hotel bar, he speaks the words: “It all seems lost. Something unexpected happens. Ghosts . . . take shape in the mind. How can one pull away from it? This phantom. The voice and the body . . . this part of one’s self.” The soliloquy indicates that Max’s desire comprises the external “setting” of the film’s action. It legislates possibility and impossibility in this dream world.

The scenes in Max’s apartment double or repeat the flashbacks in the concentration camp, and in so doing, they reverse the original distribution of power between Max and Lucia. I read these repetitions and reversals as indicating that the scenes in the apartment restage the concentration camp scenes in order to bring into view Max’s unconscious desire for Lucia, which was hidden beneath his violent treatment of her in the camp. In the camp Max was the agent of aggression; in the apartment he is the passive object, the target of the sniper whose bul-

let wounds his hand when he steps onto the balcony. In the camp Lucia had been lying on a bunk when Max selected her to be his “partner”; in Vienna Max is the one in bed in his apartment when Lucia enters, looking for him. In a scene that repeats the incident with Lucia’s wounded arm, Lucia deliberately breaks a glass on the bathroom floor, and when Max steps on the shards, cleans and bandages his foot. These parallels and reversals encourage us to read past and present scenes not as separate incidents but as different versions of the same events: the flashbacks disclose the events as they happened, the scenes in the present supply subtext of unconscious fantasy. Taken together, they suggest that every act of violence that Max inflicted upon Lucia in the camps carried a current of unconscious desire, now brought to life in the hallucinated present. I read these parallels and reversals as indicating Max’s desire to assume as his own image the “Lucia” of his creation: a vulnerable, woundable, needful being.

Understanding Max’s relation to Lucia as a relation to himself, more specifically, as a relation to a foreclosed aspect of the self that Lucia represents, accounts for the film’s concern with theatricality and impersonation. Lucia is a player in Max’s unconscious drama, and the film makes constant reference to thes and role-playing to reinforce the association between Max’s need to dramatize and Lucia’s dramatizing function. Max understands his job as night porter to be a role that he assumes and casts off with the donning of his uniform. This is why the janitor in one scene can stand in for Max by wearing his uniform. The “trial” of the SS is also a clear instance of role-playing, with different people assuming the roles of judge, jury, and defendants. When Max first notices Lucia, she is standing naked among a group of prisoners waiting to be registered. He is dressed as a doctor. When he examines Lucia’s mouth, his assistant shines a stage light on her, as if in a theatrical performance. Max later shines a similar light on Bert during his private dance performances for Max. In a flashback within the opera scene, a group of prisoners watches an officer rape a male prisoner. The prisoners are assembled like an audience, the lighting is dim, and music from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* plays, thereby establishing a link to the operatic framing scene. Still within the flashback and hence absorbing its radiating theatricality, Max silently takes Lucia into a room fitted out for medical examinations and forces her to perform an act of fellatio while the music plays in the background. The encoding of these scenes as spectacles underscores their representational function as stagings of Max’s desire.
When Lucia appears in Vienna after the war, her metamorphosis into the girl she had been in the camps takes place when she changes her clothing: the first thing she does after arriving at Max’s apartment is show Max the child’s dress she bought. In the final scene, when the two leave the apartment, Lucia is dressed as a young girl, in her child’s dress and kneesocks, while Max is wearing his officer’s uniform. The dress Lucia wears is far too small but its fit brings into exaggerated clarity what had been evident from the beginning: that Max created Lucia in the image of his unconscious desire; they are two actors playing parts in a script that inexorably controls them.

Lucia’s identity as Max’s projection is reinforced by the way she is first identified in the camps as the daughter of an Austrian socialist. She comes to life as Max’s “offspring.” Later Max tells one of the hotel residents that “his little girl” has returned.24 His confidante responds by saying that she has never seen Max so much in love. He corrects her characterization of the relationship: “No, it’s not romantic . . . it’s a biblical story.”25 The film then flashes back to a scene in the camp in which Lucia dances for a group of Nazi officers. In imitation of Herod, who gave his stepdaughter, Salomé, the head of John the Baptist, Max presents Lucia with the head of a prisoner who had been harassing her. The reference to this filial story further enforces the sense that Lucia is Max’s filial extension.

Max’s investment in Lucia is not exclusively Oedipal. Like Herod and Salomé, Max and Lucia are not blood relations. In addition, Max’s relationship with Bert indicates the polymorphous energies of his attachments; he is not bound to only one libidinal economy.26 Cavani’s decision not to restrict Max’s choice of object gives us leave to consider how all of Max’s erotic bonds work in the service of his drive to possess foreclosed aspects of his identity.

25. Ibid.
26. Kaja Silverman reads Max’s desire as restricted to the Oedipal economy and the film as exposing the illusion on which Max’s phallic identity is based. She writes, “Voluntary exhibitionism does not call into question the passivity of the female subject. Rather, it jeopardizes the illusion of masculine activity. It poses a much more profound castration threat than Freud was willing to acknowledge, for by making over the distance between the gaze and the Gaze, and by revealing the fatal attractiveness of the feminine/masochistic position, it quite literally cuts off the masculine sadistic position . . . this film seems intent on laying bare the extremity of the male subject. Max’s refusal to project that extremity on Lucia, to re-assert her inferior status by surrendering her to his associates . . . threatens the existence of the micro-culture of which he is a member. This threat is of course intolerable. Max is redefined as a traitor.” “Masochism and Subjectivity,” Framework 12 (1980): 6–8.
The filial quality of Lucia’s relation to Max signifies his attachment to her as life-extending. The film also affiliates the viewer and Lucia, through the mediation of Max’s attachment. In addition to perceiving Lucia through Max’s eyes, the film represents the tie between Lucia and Max as the only authentic relationship in the film. Lucia’s husband has little interest in her traumatic past; it does not enter his mind to consider what it means for her to return to Austria as a survivor. The morning after his concert, he reads aloud laudatory reviews, unaware that she is trembling with anxiety. Other characters and relationships are so restricted by the specters of the past that they seem barely to exist: Bert lives only to perform for Max; the wife of the Italian cook becomes catatonic when her husband, who like Lucia is a surviving witness, is murdered; and Max’s neighbor concerns herself with other people’s business.

But even as the film compels its viewers into identifying with Max through a common attachment to Lucia, it also places a limit on this identification, by affording a distancing perspective on Max. In the flashback to Lucia’s arrival to the camp, when the audience first sees Lucia through the aligned cameras of Max’s camera and Cavani, the viewer also watches Max engage in the act of seeing Lucia. This latter line of vision opens a space for critical reflection about the significance of Max’s desire for Lucia. This space is off-limits to Max—he cannot think about his own investment in her. Enabling the viewer to reflect upon Max’s fantasy world interrupts the identification with him. On the level of spectatorship the film thereby avoids pornographically duplicating Max’s attachment to Lucia.

In the scenes that take place in the camps, Max unambiguously enforces the Nazi genocidal plan. Lucia matters to Max insofar as he can exploit her as a means of self-expansion. In the camp Max makes contact with Lucia only in the context of domination and submission—he shoots at her, shackles her hands, forces her to perform sexual acts. In Vienna after the war, Max’s actions demonstrate his enduring commitment to violence: he does not hesitate to murder Mario, the Italian cook, and he cuts his ties to Bert, another bearer of tenderness. Bert’s own wounded love converts to murderous revenge in a reversal that doubles Max’s own violence: when Max and Lucia leave the apartment, Bert is in the car with the sniper who kills the couple.

27. Jean Améry discusses torture as an act of self-expansion: “In the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him... When it has happened... the torturer has expanded into the body of his fellow man.” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 35.
Max’s fantasy of preserving his connection to Lucia may be subversive, but this does not mean that Max understands his passion or that he is able to align himself with it. His fantasy is wordless; he barely speaks in Lucia’s presence, as if to suggest that he is not able to integrate what she signifies into his identity. Moreover, that the film presents the Nazi imaginary in the form of acting out further indicates the impossibility of incorporating Lucia into a psychically and socially sanctioned space. Artaud describes how, in the absence of such spaces, the theater of cruelty manifests the attitudes of mind that words cannot grasp:

The theater restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols . . .

These symbols, the sign of ripe powers previously held in servitude and unavailable to reality, burst forth in the guise of incredible images which give freedom of the city and of existence to acts that are by nature hostile to the life of societies.

In the true theater a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual).

Unable to live with Lucia, Max initially responds to her return with rage. In their first encounter in her room in the hotel, he throws her to the floor and yells, “Why did you come!” Yet he cannot renounce her either; his suffering from their estrangement becomes evident when the mock tribunal orders her to be murdered because she is a potential witness. Finally, though, lacking the psychical capacity to tolerate vulnerability, much less integrate it into his identity, Max finds himself at odds with his passion for Lucia. He is driven to a social death—becoming a recluse—which might more aptly be described a suicide.

In his discussion of the death drive, Freud examines what happens to a mind like Max’s, riven by mutually exclusive desires. Freud calls atten-

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28. The perpetrators did not speak of inner worlds; their speech was violence, which is inimical to the language of interiority. Its physical language takes the place of words. This is why Georges Bataille was struck by the absence of silence in the world of the Marquis de Sade’s violators. According to Bataille, insofar as de Sade’s torturers speak, they differ from real torturers. He writes, “Since language is by definition the expression of civilized man, violence is silent . . . violence never declares either its own existence or its right to exist; it simply exists.” Eroticism: Death and Sensuality, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 186–88.


tion to the energy of certain “innate instinctual impulses” that are not able to reach the same phase of development as other, acceptable impulses. These forestalled impulses “turn out to be incompatible in their aims or demands with the remaining ones, which are able to combine into the inclusive unity of the ego.” The energy of these incompatible impulses does not dissipate, however; instead, it impels those instincts to find alternate possibilities of satisfaction. We could say that Max’s search for alternate possibilities of satisfaction leads him to hallucination, where he fantasizes Lucia, an embodiment of the traits that his reality requires him to renounce. The phantasm of Lucia offers precisely the kind of neurotic satisfaction that is incompatible with the demands of Max’s ego. What Freud calls “satisfaction” is not synonymous with pleasure: “[P]leasure and unpleasure, being conscious feelings, are attached to the ego.”

Thus, when instincts that challenge the ego’s formation seek satisfaction, the ego experiences unpleasure: “all neurotic unpleasure is of that kind—pleasure that cannot be felt as such.”

The scene of Max’s and Lucia’s death reinforces Max’s incapacity to tolerate Lucia. Max has put on his officer’s uniform and laboriously dresses the catatonic Lucia in her girl’s outfit and then drags her out of the apartment. They drive away, knowing that the sniper who has been staking out the apartment will now complete his assignment. They park at a bridge, emerge from the car, and, with Lucia tottering against Max, take a few steps. This is not a Wagnerian reunion in death: shots ring out and the two figures collapse away from each other like marionettes.

If “the theatre is a formidable call to the forces that impel the mind by example to the source of its conflicts,” Cavani’s film exposes conflicts within the Nazi mind whose traces remain legible on the bodies of the Nazis’ victims, confirming Theweleit’s observation that “[e]veryone is

32. Ibid., 11.
33. Ibid. (footnote, added 1925).
34. Ibid., 11.
35. In his analysis of the most abject victims of the concentration camps, Wolfgang Sofsky discusses the provocative nature of apathy in the concentration camps. The Muselmänner, the most abject victims, incited the rage of the SS and the prisoner-functionaries. By the end of the film, Lucia has become the image of a concentration camp victim. In this sense her murder could be understood as a staging of the rage against the vulnerable prisoner. See “The Muselmänner,” in The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp, trans. William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially 203–4.
susceptible [to violence], in accordance with the violence that has gone into him. For some bodies, violence is a necessity. Let me say this about that: As a rule, perpetrators ‘heal’ themselves with their acts of violence. They begin ‘to live.’”

The Night Porter explores the relation between the violence that has gone into the perpetrator’s body and the resulting propensity for violence. Max’s relation to Lucia suggests that the murderous impulses of the perpetrators answered to a need “to heal” their own wounded vulnerability through the production, and then destruction, of that very attribute in their victims. In this the film bears out Theweleit’s observation that, to the fascist unconscious, the “argument that a social democrat is not a communist, a communist not an anarchist, and that none of these categories has anything to do with Jews, has never had much effect. The fascist unconscious perceives an essential sameness in all of the categories (and in the many others that made the spectrum of concentration camp prisoners so diverse).”

The Night Porter indicates that this sameness could be perceived in anyone, because what was perceived was a projected otherness. Cavani’s decision not to identify Lucia as Jewish, but rather as the daughter of a Socialist, supports Theweleit’s analysis; it suggests that the Jews were the most “available” victims because of the history of European anti-Semitism, but that Nazism could turn anyone, regardless of his or her cultural identity, into a vulnerable being and therefore into an unbearable object of rage.

38. Theweleit, Male Fantasies, 1, 383–84.